THE NIGHTMARE WORLD OF

VIDEODROME

IT'S COMING



A NOVEL BY

JACK MARTIN

BASED ON A SCREENPLAY BY

DAVID CRONENBERG

IT BEGINS WITH VERY SPECIAL
LATE-NIGHT PROGRAMS,
AIMED AT YOUR DARKEST FANTASY,
AND EVOLVES EVER MORE RAPIDLY
UNTIL THE LINE BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY
BLURS AND DISAPPEARS.

AT FIRST, YOU NEED THE CASSETTE
BUT THEN YOU ARE THE CASSETTE
AND VIDEO IMAGES ARE REALITY
AND REALITY IS THE FINAL HORROR.

A WORLD OF TELEVISED MADNESS
EXISTING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE SCREEN,
A WORLD IN WHICH
STAR AND VICTIM ARE ONE . . .
AND YOU ARE BOTH!

PIERRE DAVID **and** VICTOR SOLNICKI

Present A

DAVID CRONENBERG **Film**

“VIDEODROME”

Starring

JAMES WOODS • SONJA SMITTS
and DEBORAH HARRY **as** NICKI

Also Starring

PETER DVORSKY • LES CARLSON
JACK GRELEY • LYNNE GORMAN

Special Makeup

RICK BAKER

Associate Producer

LAWRENCE NESIS

Produced by

CLAUDE HEROUX

Executive Producers

VICTOR SOLNICKI **and** PIERRE DAVID

Written and Directed by

DAVID CRONENBERG

A FILMPLAN INTERNATIONAL **Production**

A UNIVERSAL **Release**

LARGER THAN LIFE

"Who's behind it?" Max asked earnestly, or thought earnestly. As if he could be heard. As if he could ever have been heard. "What do they want?"

I want you, Max. You.

The voice was Nicki's. Max turned toward the set.

Come to me, Max. Come to Nicki. She advanced on the camera so that her features filled the entire nineteen-inch screen. Then her enlarged face pressed out into the room in extreme close-up, all wet teeth and red cupid's-bow lips. Max heard the crackling lilt of her breathing in his ears as the speaker cone vibrated and stretched out to him, a living orifice.

Max approached the set—as if in a dream.

He fell to his knees before Nicki's image. And as he grasped the breathing sides of the set, her larger-than-life lips distended to meet his forehead, the glass of the tube melting and ballooning outward to touch his skin.

As Max pressed his face into Nicki's, the electron guns shot their images directly into his brain . . .

Max closed his eyes, no longer needing them to see.



BY JACK MARTIN

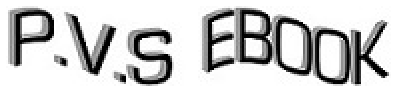
A NOVEL
BASED ON A SCREENPLAY BY
DAVID CRONENBERG



ZEBRA BOOKS
KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.

ZEBRA BOOKS
are published by

KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.
475 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10016



Printed in the United States of America

To those who feel the pain they see.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.

—Sylvia Plath

The medium is the massage.

—Marshall McLuhan

To extreme sickness, extreme remedies.

—Montaigne

Part One:

Samurai Dreams

Chapter One

Max Renn awoke to find himself in a room he had never seen before.

It was small, soundproofed, little more than a chamber. But bright lights as blue-white as daylight shone down on him from an unseen source. Somewhere behind the lights faces shifted—pale, unsmiling faces. Witnesses. He sensed that for some reason they were more frightened than he; the knowledge amused him. He heard their robes rustling for position over the polished floor.

Kenshi, he thought.

The floor became red beneath his feet as a hand pressed him to his knees. The fingers were firm but not unkind. Their pressure was almost loving, their gentle insistence almost cruel.

His legs folded under him and he sank to the crimson carpet.

He had no choice.

But that was all right. After all, how else could it end?

It would be a new experience. The ultimate one. Wouldn't it?

Now he saw the small table. A clearly audible gasp went up from behind the lights as he reached forward and grasped the wrapped handle of the short sword, curved and shaped to lie easily across his open palm. It balanced there perfectly, as if it had always been there, as if it had grown there while he was sleeping. He drew the blade from its sheath, and was filled with a great peace.

He straightened his back and strained toward the promise of release. Breaths, his own and many others, were held in quivering expectation as the lights trembled and sang. The air became warm, moist, and began to distort into grainy bands of light and darkness.

He felt new eyes very close by, behind and above him.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the broad, painted face of a woman, his *kaishaku.* She was somehow familiar. He had never known her like.

One of the *kenshi* cleared his throat and began the litany of charges.

Max could not understand the words. But he knew what the sentence would be.

His hand closed around the shaft.

Suddenly a wave of desire washed over him as he prepared for the first thrust.

The singing of the lights and the shrill, authoritative voice of his accuser rose in pitch until the close walls reverberated with a sound that was very much like a scream.

Her eyes were looking at him.

"MAX, IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN . . ."

The scream became a crackling lilt.

"TIME TO SLOWLY, PAINFULLY EASE YOURSELF BACK INTO CONSCIOUSNESS. NO, I'M NOT A DREAM, ALTHOUGH I'VE BEEN TOLD I'M A VISION OF LOVELINESS."

She giggled.

"I'M NOTHING LESS THAN YOUR FAITHFUL GIRL FRIDAY, BRIDEY JAMES, WITH YOUR WAKE-UP CALL FOR TODAY, WHICH IS WEDNESDAY THE 23RD. GOT THAT?"

He rolled over, and awoke again.

The face was speaking to him from across the room.

The dream began to fade.

He felt new eyes very close by, behind and above him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the broad A DREAM of a woman, his *kaishaku.* She was somehow LOVELINESS . . . He had never known her like. One FAITHFUL GIRL FRIDAY began the litany of charges WHICH IS WEDNESDAY THE 23RD. Max could not understand AND I HAVE A MESSAGE: REMEMBER the shaft. A wave of SHINJI KURAKI OF HIROSHIMA VIDEO . . . the first thrust. TO TAKE PLACE AT THE CLASSIC HOTEL of his accuser WHO WORKS NINE TO FIVE? OVER AND OUT, COMMANDER."

Her eyes were looking at him.

Bridey, he thought groggily. You'll never win first prize in the Miss Toronto contest. But guess what? You're beginning to look better and better to me . . .

But then everything looks better on TV, doesn't it?

He struggled to find his watch. It was on his wrist. But he could not find his arm. He had fallen asleep with his arm twisted under him; now it shivered awake with the pain of pins and needles. The sensation made his teeth hurt. He lay there waiting for it to end, or to begin.

He found his arm, raised it numbly to his forehead and, in the dim light that was leaking through the curtains, tried to read the hands against the black watch-face.

Good old Bridey. She was right again. Of course.

It was that time already.

With his good hand he groped for the remote control, but not before

the wake-up cassette repeated.

He punched the volume down and watched his secretary's nineteen-inch face mouth the message a second time.

I used to have a thing, he thought, for prissy, puritanical types, back about the time I was in Radio and Television Arts College. Bridey . . . another month working for me and who knows? Play your cards right and you might end up shacking with the president of Civic TV.

If I can stomach the job that much longer.

Well then, Bridey, maybe you'd like my job. Maybe that's what you've secretly been after all along. If so, you know what? You can be my guest. You can start spending all day, every day scrounging for new programming. And *I* can start living out my fantasies, instead of buying and selling other people's dreams like sausages by the pound. You want it, kid? You've got it. It's all yours.

He punched up the volume again before the tape finished. He wasn't at all certain that it had made sense to him the first time.

". . . AND I HAVE A MESSAGE: REMEMBER YOUR MEETING AT 6:30 THIS MORNING WITH SHINJI KURAKI OF HIROSHIMA VIDEO. THIS MEETING IS TO TAKE PLACE AT THE CLASSIC HOTEL, 483 KING STREET WEST, SUITE 58, AND NEEDLESS TO SAY IT'S YOUR FIRST OF THE DAY. DON'T YOU KNOW ANYONE WHO WORKS NINE-TO-FIVE? OVER AND OUT, COMMANDER."

Right, he thought, as Bridey's twinkling, state-of-the-art eyes stared mercilessly into his living room. He had fallen asleep watching television again. This time as she finished she was replaced by the sign-on logo for Channel 83, *The One You Take to Bed with You.* Then the close, stale, grainy air and Max's head were pierced through by the station's fanfare, jaunty, brash and cheerfully schlocky, modulated too high as last-ditch wake-up insurance. After a few notes the theme segued into a relentless electronic tone, and the picture tube was louvered by the Day-Glow bars of a color test pattern.

There was no escaping it.

He stretched and disembedded his legs from the sofa. Inch by tortured inch. He waited to feel the touch of his feet on the carpet. It seemed to take a very long time, as if he were moving in slow motion instead of real time.

He dragged himself through his apartment, punching buttons as he went, as though dressing a set with lights.

The dark green walls of the cramped kitchen damped much of the indirect lighting; only the occasional piece of red enamel cookware reflected painfully back into his eyes, like the jar of Ragu sauce on the shelf, like the glistening smears scarring the warped pizza box on the

table.

He fired up his battered espresso machine and drew a thick cupful, feeling the heat from the nozzle steaming his eyes open the rest of the way. Idly he reached for a congealed slice of the half-eaten pizza. He stood chewing as he fingered a scattered stack of stills on the counter.

Each of the glossies bore the title *Samurai Dreams.* On the first photo the identification was just below the small, bared breasts of an apparently nude Japanese woman. Her hands were raised to unwrap her traditional hair; her narrow eyes were closed and on her face was a distracted, ambivalent expression that seemed poised somewhere on the edge between pain and pleasure.

He could not be sure what was going on out-of-frame, but the possibilities were distinctly limited.

The other photos were in the same style. The frames had been blown up and cropped for the sake of modesty and the postal authorities, but the masking only worked to heighten the tease. Max had seen enough material of a similar sort to appreciate how canny and calculated it was. The stills were vaguely exotic, with just enough cheap artiness to offset the blatant eroticism. The result was a pretentious but low-key sell.

Now, as when he had first looked them over last night, Max found them ultimately dull and unexciting. Something was missing.

Depressed, he tossed the photographs down, leaving a weak dribble of pizza sauce like cold blood across one of the black-and-white torsos.

And noticed that the red smear added a flash of unexpected color to the pose—enough to pique his interest. Despite the hour he felt the first tentative stirrings of a connoisseur's curiosity. Distracted, he tried to rub off the red stain. That only made it worse.

Frowning uneasily and scratching his belly through his rumpled clothes, he left the kitchen.

Samurai Dreams, he mused. Hmm.

What was it really about?

Now the model in the photo seemed oddly familiar, like the projection of one of his private fantasies on the screen of 8 x 10 inch paper.

He tried but couldn't remember.

For the time being, he let it go.

"So good to see you again, Max!"

The security chain was in place but the screws were pulling out of the jamb. A good hard shove, thought Max, and she'd open wide.

He smiled tightly at Shinji Kuraki's low, polished head. In his nervous haste the Japanese businessman drew the chain taut instead of unhooking it. Now the screws ripped free and dangled, widening the slit in the doorway to permit unopposed entry.

The door creaked back and Max stepped into Suite 58.

Shinji's bows became a rhythmic and mildly embarrassing affectation. Dutifully he shook Max's hand and then unfolded his fingers like the blades of a greasy fan, indicating another plaid jacket against the heavy curtains.

"My associate, Hiro Nakamura."

"How's it going?" said Max.

The associate smiled stoically behind his close-cropped baby beard and took up his post at a flimsy card table. An open briefcase displayed stacks of small vinyl containers arranged in an arcane pattern. Max squinted at the titles as he passed the table, but the words were unreadable in the dim light which filtered wanly through the red drapes. They were probably untranslated ideograms, anyway. Max sat.

The two businessmen seated themselves before him with a show of controlled casualness. But behind their buttoned collars they were straining at the leash like dogs trained to wait for first blood before moving in for the kill.

"Well," Max began with measured enthusiasm. He felt them inch closer, a thin film of perspiration buttering their wide faces. "I looked over the stills. I'm interested."

The bearded man puffed up confidently in his stiff chair.

"A little bit," Max added.

The balding man leaned in, proffering a half-empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Red, and a thin scent of Right Guard deodorant wafted toward Max. It dawned on him that the two had been at it all night; the bottle was occluded with fingerprints.

They're running on Hiroshima time, he realized, waving the bottle aside. Jesus Christ, it's not even seven a.m. here. Don't they know that? Don't they care? No. Of course not. Why should they?

He showed them his teeth. "How many shows?"

"Thirteen," said Shinji immediately, "with the possibility of another six, if the sales go well." His eyes were black beads in his flat face, all pupil, like a shark's eyes.

"You got cassettes?"

"Of course, Max."

The tension broke and there were curt laughs all around. The balding man snapped his fingers and his associate went into action,

wheeling out a cassette machine. Shinji dealt the first tape out of the briefcase.

Max stopped his wrist. “Uh, hold it.” The balding man reacted with surprise. Max flashed his teeth again for reassurance. “Show me the last one. Number thirteen.”

Shinji’s eyes widened, desperately *sanpaku.* “But Max,” he pleaded, “everything is set up in the first two. You won’t understand anything!”

“My audience isn’t going to see the first two shows.” Max maintained eye contact without flinching. “Show me the last one.”

Reluctantly Shinji deferred.

Max settled back. He considered removing his overcoat, loosening the leather necktie that bound his throat, but did not want to imply any longer stay than was absolutely necessary.

He felt off-center and mildly oppressed; he hadn’t had time for a shower, had barely managed a quick shave, and had made it this far on nothing but coffee and sheer guts. The warm tone of the fresh paint on the walls didn’t make it any easier. He scanned the room as he waited. He rubbed his temples, tapped his fingers, took out a bent cigarette. The new paint didn’t hide much. Cracks showed through like the outline of veins in the plaster; it seemed not quite dry. He wondered what it would feel like were he to touch it; he imagined his fingers sinking in and leaving an impression like a handprint in moulage. He lit up and dragged so deeply that no smoke was visible when he exhaled.

The television monitor flickered to life.

The three men turned their heads to it with exaggerated nonchalance.

The tinny strains of a melody plucked on the strings of a koto filled the hotel room and the chamber onscreen, where just now a somewhat modernized geisha was preoccupied with the unfettering of her thick black hair.

Her eyes closed dreamily.

Her robe fell away from snowy shoulders as, behind and above her, shadows moved against ricepaper panels. Two ersatz Samurai warriors appeared and began delicately, respectfully to caress her fragile skin. Then their robes, too, fell away . . .

Max fidgeted.

The performance was discreet, charming, surprisingly slick—and only mildly provocative. At least so far. He had known it would be this way. But he had to be sure. He had to see everything with his own eyes.

“Lighting’s not right,” he said to himself.

“What?” Shinji was taken aback. “I can assure you, Max, we use only the best facilities. Our cameraman has worked for Oshima. Our lighting director—”

“It’s too neutral. It should be more like daylight. Blue, you know?”

The Orientals were staring at him.

“At least that’s the way I remember it.” He snapped to, remembering where he was. “Forget it.”

“There is another series like this? Some other supplier . . . ?”

“No, not at all. It’s just—it reminds me of something.”

“Of what, Max?” The businessman racked his brain. Finally he settled on a satisfactory explanation. He searched for the right words. “Ahh, I see. The paintings of Utamaro, perhaps? Our art director—”

“Which one is the *kenshi?”* Max pointed impatiently at the screen. Other figures had entered and were pairing off gracefully in the background.

“Kenshi?” said the supplier. The televised pattern of orchestrated movements reflected off his face, causing his features to cloud and squirm. “A Japanese word meaning ‘witness’. Is that what you mean to say?”

Max was aware of their eyes scrutinizing him. He was uncomfortable, self-conscious. They would never understand. He decided to make the best of it and bluff his way out. In his most reasonable voice he said, “Yeah. Isn’t there supposed to be one? I always thought—”

“A witness to what, Max?”

“For the ceremony. Look, forget it. I really don’t know anything about it.”

“On the contrary. We’re most interested to hear your suggestions. And you have obviously studied our culture.” The balding man bowed again in the gentle strobing. “But I am afraid this is not that kind of ceremony.”

“Right. I was looking through a book about Samurai last night, before I went to bed. Research.”

Shinji beamed. “You have done your homework.”

They watched awhile longer.

The loveplay was now horizontal but far from explicit, with kimonos flowing open but not completely removed. Pink knees were raised heavenward, legs opened and closed like butterfly wings. The koto music played on, tastefully masking any hint of heavy breathing. The effect was soothing, even hypnotic.

Max found himself watching intently, convinced that one of the

panels in the wall would open at any moment, admitting another, darker figure.

“He needs a second,” muttered Max, as a thick-waisted Samurai began panting in extreme close-up.

Once again they were looking at him.

Max definitely wanted to be out of there. He could hear himself; he wasn’t making a whole lot of sense. Still . . .

“You know, a *kaishaku,* isn’t that what you call it?” He attempted a grin to relax them. “I saw it in a Toshiro Mifune movie once.”

The two Orientals consulted. Then Shinji turned back and said with infinite patience, “No, Max. A *kaishaku,* or second, is present only in matters of honor. As in *seppuku.* Or, as you Westerners know it, *hara-kiri.”*

There was an awkward lull.

Now I’ve done it, thought Max forlornly. Caffeine nerves, insomnia . . . look what happens to you. Get a grip on yourself, boy. I’ve gone and offended another supplier. Have to tell Bridey not to schedule any more early-morning meetings, no matter what. Dreams, TV, it all runs together at this hour. Can I help it? I should have known better.

Am I supposed to apologize now? How? For what?

A sudden light animated Shinji’s face, and his eyes squeezed closed with mirth.

“Ah, I see! Yes. Very clever of you, Max. A *second* to help him finish, after he has made the *first thrust!* Hah! A joke . . . !”

Max nodded quickly, relieved, and slapped the table with them.

When the laughter subsided, he rose to go. He stopped the tape and ejected the cassette.

“Let me take this one with me. I’ll have to show it to the brass before I can give you an answer. You’ll hear from me before noon.”

In the background, the koto music continued behind an ancient ritual.

Chapter Two

"What do you think?"

Max slouched in his chair and waited for a reaction.

They certainly seemed to be taking it seriously. Appallingly so. Not a good sign.

He stabbed a pile of papers with his pencil and swiveled back and forth, presenting as disinterested an attitude as possible.

If he didn't rush them they might make out the handwriting on the wall, so to speak, without his prodding. Come on, he thought, admit that you're bored. You'd damn well better decide to move into the future; it's where we're all going to have to spend the rest of our lives. Not in some stylized imitation of a past that never really existed.

"Can we get away with it?"

Still no response.

The koto music twanged on.

"Do we *want* to get away with it?"

Moses Janoff turned back to the long desk and dragged his elbows through the papers.

Here we go, thought Max.

Moses cleared his sinuses and said in his huskiest, most earnest and most humorless voice, "I think Oriental sex is a natural. I think it'll get us an audience we've never had before."

Of course, thought Max. Fits right in, doesn't it? One chickenshit half-step for Civic TV, one half-step backwards for mankind.

"I don't like it," said Raphael. The Creative Director locked his hands behind his head and kicked back expansively. Max could almost see the wheels spinning behind his bulging forehead, balancing timeslots and projecting overnight shares. At least he's not brown-nosing, thought Max; or maybe he is. Maybe it's just that he can read my face, what's underneath this bland expression, more accurately than Moses. "It's not tacky enough."

Seize the moment. Or else it's more of the same. Pretty soon we'll be back to Italian bedroom farces and wet T-shirt movies. And by that time it will be too late. Our audience isn't going to stay turned on and tuned in to this sort of evasion forever. We'll have to convert to FM or go out of business.

“Not tacky enough for what?” Max asked.

“Not tacky enough to turn me on.”

And what would turn you on? wondered Max. Gordie Howe in a rubber dress? No, nothing that radical. But it’s okay—we’re getting somewhere. When even Raphael with his short-sleeved shirts and cornfed baby face starts admitting he’s bored, maybe there’s hope for the rest of us, after all. Kitsch is like popcorn: empty calories. It’s not going to satisfy an adult appetite indefinitely. And we’re supposed to be beaming our signal out to an audience of adults. And my executives are supposed to be representatives of that audience. They probably are; more typical than I’d realized.

So don’t push them too hard. They’ll open up. The barometers of public opinion may move exceedingly slowly; but they do move. Eventually. Give them a chance to think of the alternatives themselves. That way it will stick. They’ll think they invented artistic progress on their own. If I try to ram my own ideas about programming onto the airwaves without their general support, they’ll see me as a threat to what little job security they’ve got now. And I’ll have a mutiny on my hands.

“Too much class is bad for sex,” Raphael added, as if the idea had just occurred to him.

Behind Raphael’s head a pair of posters for Channel 83’s Late Night Monster Mash were framed on the wall. *UP FROM THE DEPTHS,* warned one of the posters, a low-budget horror film the title of which, like most of its kind, promised much more than it delivered; but the promise was amorphous, merely suggestive, so no one in the audience would feel cheated exactly, not in any way that could be defined. The title of the poster next to it was *SOMETHING.* Max had missed that one. Just as well. He could tell by the ad art that it was another empty come-on, too half-hearted even to say what it was really about. The Horror That Dares Not Speak Its Name. Bullshit.

But *something* was about to dredge itself up from the superficial depths of these faint hearts, these steadfastly middlebrow guardians of social stability; he could feel it.

In fact, Raphael had just now taken the first timid step. Did he himself realize it? Probably not.

Max pounced, speaking directly to Raphe’s unsocialized backbrain.

“Maybe,” he said with deliberate understatement. “I don’t know.” Will somebody please turn off that koto music? he thought. “There is something too . . . soft about it.”

He decided to push them a bit, now that their right hemispheres were open and receptive. This moment might never come again.

"I'm—I'm looking for something that'll *break through,* you know?"

Let them help me. Let them formulate a policy that will take the station in a direction I've already dreamed. That way, if it craps out, it won't mean my head on a platter for the Board of Directors.

I've planted the seed. Now pick it up, he thought. Take that ball and go. You can do it.

It was midmorning and the sun was slanting in obliquely through the blinds of the office. Now, at this properly civilized hour, something in him wanted to leap across the desk, tear open the windows and let the full harshness of reality shine in. At this point he was ready; he could take it. Could they? He didn't care anymore. But he felt he was ready for anything. It might burn the skin off his bleary eyes but it would feel good. It would warm him.

Instead he rubbed his temple in frustration and met Moses's eyes for the first time this morning.

"Something . . . *tough,"* Max added, grinding the word out through his teeth.

Moses backed off invisibly from the challenge. He shrugged and grinned sheepishly.

"To me," he said, "sex is soft. Maybe I'm a sick person."

Careful, Mose, thought Max. You ought to give a thought to the direction the world is moving. Don't spit on anything when the wind's against you. It might blow back.

The soft-core costume party blipped off and faded rapidly from the screen, a dream of innocence that was already dissolving into distant memory, and was gone.

Max swung out of the conference room and into the main artery of the building, suppressing an itch that he didn't yet know how to scratch. The morning shift was already in full motion. He passed an electrician jangling with tools, a carpenter tracking sawdust out of Studio A, a cluster of schoolchildren on a tour of the facilities, and a huddle of secretaries by the elevator, their high-pitched voices as hard and impersonal as telephones answered directly from the shower, as cold as window glass, and as brittle.

They said something behind his back but he held himself aloof, pretending not to hear. My fly is probably unzipped, he thought. Either that or the grapevine knows something I don't. Maybe I should ask their advice. It might help. It sure as hell couldn't hurt.

There was Bridey's tidy desk in the corner, a blockade between his office and the reception area.

She greeted him. "Hi, Max!"

“Hi, doll. Got any fresh coffee?”

She was waving her hands in front of him as if drying her nails in a great hurry. “Maxie, you’ve got a whole boardful of messages.”

“Already? Give me a break.”

“There’s no rest for the weary at Bedroom TV.” She scanned her pad. “Um, first I’m supposed to remind you not to forget Rena King. Her people were on the line when I came in. But that’s not till tonight, eight-thirty—seven o’clock for makeup and run-through. Before that —”

“Who in Christ’s name is Rena . . . ? Never mind.” His heart sank. “I remember.” That woman from Public Television, he thought glumly, the one with the face like an Avon lady and a headful of fluorocarbons. “Got it. Anything else?”

“I’m trying to tell you, boss. Give a girl a chance, will you?” She defused her persistence with a self-deprecating giggle. “Hiroshima Video phoned three times in the last hour. They’ve got meetings all day. They say they need an answer or the deal is off.”

“Then tell them it’s off.”

She took that in stride, made a notation. “Plus Harlan wants you down in the lab. It’s supposed to be important.”

“It always is. What is it this time? Somebody sabotage our tower again?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Where’s that coffee?”

She poured him a cup. The tension that held her face together relaxed momentarily, leaving her perfectly-painted eyes and mouth without character. “Boss, will—would you like to have lunch with me?”

“You know I never eat lunch.” But he had to smile at her doggedness. It was an ongoing game. “What’s the matter, am I getting too thin for you?”

“Oh, nothing like that. It’s just, well—”

“You’re beginning to sound like my ex-wife, you know that?”

That grabbed her by the short hairs.

“Perish the thought.” Her brow refurrowed and she resumed checking off her list.

That frosted her knockers, he thought. She doesn’t even know I don’t have an ex-wife. Why should I tell her?

“Plus Air Canada called again about that ticket to L.A. The VISA card’s overdrawn.” She clicked her ballpoint pen against her straight teeth and blinked up at him again with big, doleful eyes, eyes that

gave her away all too easily. “Plus I still need a decision on lunch. How about it?”

“How about it?” He met her eyes full on and pinned her where she stood. “Your place or mine?”

Was that a blush? Not bloody likely; there was nothing about Bridey that didn’t show. Still, she wasn’t used to having her bluff called.

She lowered her head. “If you’re not back here at half-past twelve, I—well, I thought I’d go over to the Flaming Rooster. On Bloor.” She lifted her chin again gamely, her eyes as clear as water on the air. “I could bring something back, if you like. For the office. If you’re too tired to go out. It’s no trouble.”

Bridey, he thought. God bless you. But something’s missing. I don’t know what it is, I swear to Christ I don’t. But if I figure it out you’ll be the first to know.

“Thanks,” he said. “Hard to say where I’ll be. You know how it is.” He knew she did. “If I’m here, fine. If I get hung up somewhere, not to worry. Keep on looking out for Number One, right?”

“That can get kind of old after awhile,” she said.

“You’re telling me?”

He squeezed her shoulder and made for the stairs, downing the coffee as he went. It was hot, too hot; it blistered his tongue. But at least he could feel it.

The electronics lab was a converted laundry room in the basement of the building, which had been built originally as one of the better hotels of its day, and its day was long past.

Nominally Harlan was only one of several technicians on the payroll of Civic TV. In actuality he was indispensable, the jack-of-all-trades who alone knew how to cobble together impossible recombinations of outdated equipment in order to keep a constant carrier signal feeding to the transmitter against all odds, with or without a budget adequate to cover the frequent needed repairs.

And, for Max, he performed an additional service: tirelessly and without complaint he contrived endless new methods of pulling in stray signals from intercontinental broadcasts of the sort to which Channel 83’s late-night core audience remained loyal—adult public access cablecasts via microwave from stateside, topless ice skating extravaganzas from Vegas, blue comedy specials staged exclusively for pay service subscribers. Even the occasional golden oldie syndicated rerun from the lower forty-eight. In other words, precisely the kind of raisins in the cake which Civic TV could not afford to acquire legally. In technical terms the practice was piracy; operationally speaking no

one cared, at least no one who had the power to pull the plug on the operation. There were no complaints so far, only a few confused calls to the night switchboard operator over unscheduled programming. Apparently the members of the Broadcasting Commission all went to bed early.

They didn't know what they were missing.

For this—for tracking down and taping the signals for de facto replay—Max privately fed Harlan a diet of fat bonuses. Max was still able to pocket what was left over out of each season's acquisition allowance, after normal daytime programming had been paid for. Which wasn't much; like everything else, operating costs were climbing astronomically. Which made Harlan only that much more indispensable.

It had made sense from the beginning, and it made more sense now. With so many pay franchises bouncing their signals off a skyful of communications satellites, there was almost no point anymore to buying in through legal timesharing, even if one had unlimited funds. As long as Harlan made sure he "borrowed" from a mixture of sources, and as long as Max utilized primarily the occasional pirated feature or foreign series to salt an otherwise above-board after-hours schedule, the chances of getting caught with your hand in somebody else's relay were about as great as finding rocking horse shit in a nursery. There wasn't a scrambler yet made that Harlan couldn't juryrig a way to decode, given enough playtime in his very own workshop.

And Harlan had made the sub-basement recognizably his own and no one else's, with hand-lettered signs decorating hotwired hardware that looked like props straight out of Victor Frankenstein's toybox. No one else ever came down here, and if they did, what would they see? The nuts-and-bolts underpinnings of a working business. What was so unusual about that? No one would give it a second look. It would take another technician to spot what was going on sub rosa, and why would another Civic TV technician jeopardize his own job by blowing the whistle on the station that was his meal ticket? As for the janitors—well, it was obvious at first glance, nay first whiff, that the cleaning crew had not been on this level in years. Bridey knew, but Max himself would see to it that she was kept happy as a clam over the station's ratings. She felt she had a personal stake in Channel 83's future. And so she might; who could say? The wheel turns . . .

"Hey, Harlan. What you got for me?"

Harlan with his frizzy hair looked as if he slept patched into a mixing board, as if he dressed himself with whatever was left in the backpack he had toted downstairs his very first day on the job. His cords were dangerously threadbare at the seat; his jacket liner had an

aura about it. His geometrical red plaid shirt blended with the multicolored bundles of insulated wiring around him, as if the shirt itself were some new kind of flexible printed circuit he had invented in his spare time.

"Something you ought to see, *patrón.*"

Near his head a handmade sign on the cracked and spackled plaster, above a bank of video monitors of every conceivable size and make: VIDEO BOUTIQUE.

Max shook his head indulgently.

Harlan hooked a finger and beckoned to a ½-inch videotape recorder. He boosted the gain on a monitor which was balanced precariously on a metal typewriter table. He made final calibrations on the deck, fine-tuning the wheels with the sensitivity of a safecracker.

"Okay." He rewound the tape. A high, oscillating whine sizzled in one speaker. "Here we go."

He rechecked the footage counter and peered at Max over rimless glasses. His eyes were neutral but unblinking.

Max couldn't pick up a clue. He pressed closer.

"It'll come through on that one. We only got about fifty-three seconds, so keep your eyes open." Harlan actually sounded apologetic. "They've got an unscrambler scrambler, if you know what I mean. It sensed that we were unscrambling and, ah, automatically changed its code on us."

Why would they go to that much trouble to protect an entertainment broadcast? wondered Max. There must be quite a few Harlans doing mischief in the world lately. Somebody's getting hip.

"What satellite is it from?"

"Snooker," said Harlan, then added, "I think."

"Country of origin?"

"Ah, well. Assuming that fifty-three seconds represents the period of delay, I'd say somewhere in, ah, Malaysia?" Harlan pushed his glasses up and started the tape. "Here we go. This is it."

Rolling.

A mesh of interference pulled the vertical out of alignment for two or three seconds, and then the image stabilized.

It did not look like any show Max had ever witnessed before.

The camera did not pan and it did not dolly; neither did it zoom. There were no cutaways, no close-ups, no reaction shots. It appeared at first sight to be an actuality broadcast. Except that the color was rich and dark, not the work of a portable location unit. The lighting

was extreme and dramatic. And red. There was lots of red.

Max leaned in until his nose was about to touch the tube.

"What the hell is that, clay?" he asked. He was curious. He also had a need to override the peculiar soundtrack with his own voice. He felt acute embarrassment. And something else.

"Clay," said Harlan matter-of-factly. As if discussing a sporting event. "Wet clay."

There was no music. Only the pleading and the screaming, as a woman was dragged across a room toward a moist, unevenly-sculpted wall by two men in black hoods. Her clothing, what was left of it, dangled in tatters over what appeared to be a wet gridwork floor. Yes, it was wet. The two men wore rubber boots, the boots sloshing through rising water.

The last of the cloth was stripped from her by the single powerful swipe of a gloved hand.

Manacles at the edges of the red clay wall. Her limbs were spread and her wrists roughly strung up. She screamed even louder when she saw the electrical switches.

Her eyes were those of a trapped animal, the length of her naked body writhing in the prelude to a death spasm. Her mouth opened, her lips cracking until they bled, a darkness in her throat as the room became red, redder . . .

Her eyes were looking at—

A spatter of static obliterated the screen.

Then blackness.

Harlan stopped the tape. "That's it."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Grotesque, huh?"

Max shuddered, tried to cover the response. "Can you hang a searcher on it next time it shows?"

"Already workin' on it." Harlan's tone brightened as he rewound and removed the reel. He seemed relieved. As if he had already managed to forget it. "I was pretty insulted when it just shrugged us off in less than a minute." To him, the technical challenge was all that mattered. "Well, *patrón?"*

Max considered the possibilities.

One, it was an ordinary commercial transmission.

Two, it was an uncensored movie for pay TV.

Three, it was *vérité* footage.

Four, it was a hoax.

He couldn't make up his mind based solely on what he had seen.

But he had a feeling already, he had a feeling.

Max was staring at the spot where the picture had been.

Harlan was staring at him. “Interested?”

Max shook it off and stepped back casually. He adjusted his coat. His tie was loosened. He didn’t remember doing that.

“Yeah . . .” he said noncommittally, letting his voice trail off. His vocal cords were dry. He pretended to check his watch and made a beeline for the stairwell door.

DANGER, warned one of Harlan’s signs, 600,000 VOLTS. Some joke. Gingerly he reached for the doorknob to let himself out.

“Oh, Harlan,” he called back. He paused to get the technician’s attention, which was already on other matters.

Max touched his knuckles to a posterboard on the door. HOME OF THE BUCCANEERS—PIRACY ON THE HIGH FREQUENCIES!

“Could you do something about the labels?” He showed Harlan his teeth. “This is supposed to be a *clandestine* operation . . .”

Right? he nodded.

Harlan hung his head, as a headache began to pound behind Max’s eyes, making the room seem red and grainy.

Chapter Three

"I guess you can't help being a little nervous," Max was saying, "even —even if you've been doing it all your life. Don't you think?"

He leaned across the padded arm of his contour chair and tried to lose himself in conversation with the woman in the red dress.

He was playing a game with himself, behaving as though the live audience were not out there waiting for the show to begin. But it wasn't working. He heard their restless shiftings beyond the key lights.

She was playing, too, but not for the same reasons. She kept her eyes focused not on him but on the red light that had come on atop Camera Two. She was not ignoring him. Quite the contrary. It was her way, her role, and she was playing it to the hilt.

"Yeah," she answered easily, "oh yeah." She flicked her cigarette over the canister ashtray between them. The filter tip was stained a brilliant iridescent red. "Of course, that's part of the excitement of it."

"Mmm."

Max wanted to avail himself of the pitcher of water on the low table before them. But his hands felt slippery. He didn't trust himself.

A burst of canned music reverberated off the sleek, poured-concrete walls of the Town Hall. The audience moved their hands together in a rising tide of white noise.

Max blotted his hands on his trousers and sat higher, facing forward with his best, most boyish smile. He kicked one foot out and swiveled slightly. Mr. Confidence.

He tried to steal a glimpse of himself on the monitor to see how he was doing so far. But the pole-mounted set next to the other woman, Rena King, wasn't on him. There was the face of a man, but it was not his face. It was much older, with less hair. The man looked strangely familiar . . . Max spotted another monitor at the side of the stage, but it was too far away to make out. He gave up and decided to fly blind.

The audience response died down. Then there was only a rustling susurrus.

Max maintained his smile.

Let them watch, he thought. What do I care? Besides, I've got a hell of a lot riding on our public image at the moment. Keep them happy and they won't sic their watchdogs on us.

“AND NOW HERE IT IS, *THE RENA KING SHOW!* AND THIS EVENING RENA’S GUESTS ARE MAX RENN, CONTROVERSIAL PRESIDENT OF CHANNEL 83 . . . NICKI BRAND, RADIO PERSONALITY AND PROBLEM-SOLVER . . . AND MEDIA PROPHET PROFESSOR BRIAN O’BLIVION . . . TAKE IT AWAY, RENA!”

The woman Max had been unintentionally cold-shouldering for the past few minutes adjusted the hem of her purple dress and nodded at her friend, the camera. Her head moved but her hair did not.

She folded her hands in her lap to indicate that this was a serious occasion and angled her shoulders to include the table and other chairs. She opened her throat. Max got a whiff of Listerine.

“Max Renn . . . your television station offers its viewers everything from soft-core pornography to hard-core violence.” Her mascaraed eyes darted to the cue cards below the camera. She smacked her lips dryly. “Why?”

There was lipstick on her teeth.

“Well, it’s a matter of economics, Rena.” Max fell into his role with ease. “We’re, uh, small. In order to survive, we have to give people something they can’t get anywhere else. And, uh, we do that.”

Max was pleased with himself. That’s something they can grasp, he thought, something they can sympathize with. Isn’t it? His eyes adjusted somewhat and he squinted at the sea of faces beyond the blue-white lights for confirmation. But they were silent as judges.

He inclined his head toward Nicki Brand, the pop psychologist waiting to be interviewed on his left.

She only stared straight ahead into the lighted camera, as unruffled as a hometown beauty queen at a dinner-dance.

The hostess wouldn’t let him off the hook quite so easily.

“But don’t you feel that such shows contribute to a social climate of violence and sexual malaise? And do you care?”

Blah blah blah, thought Max. He had heard all the arguments before. He centered his white tie against his brown shirt and nodded sympathetically.

“Certainly I care,” he answered promptly, fielding the question with ease. “I care enough, in fact, to give my viewers a harmless outlet for their fantasies and frustrations.” He opened his palms, showing them empty and innocent. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s a socially positive act.”

He avoided the glare of Rena King’s steely contact lenses and waited to juggle her next bombshell. Besides, with that purple dress of hers, the stenciled makeup, she blended in only too well with the lifeless background, the sterile decorator designs of the set. The layout was

too pat; he longed to inject even a moment of raw disorder into the proceedings, to subvert it, so to speak. It was too perfect a target; it cried out to be defiled, to be brought alive by the parturient breath of real life, if even only for one second.

Just now he allowed himself a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye. One of the fronds of the potted jungle palm behind her swayed in an updraft of convection. For an instant it threatened to close in, pinioning her in its lush Asian foliage. Was there another plant behind him? He hoped not; he had forgotten to look.

He waited a beat, then located the monitor at the side of the stage. The camera was tight on Rena King. She looked better on TV, he concluded.

But she passed him over and moved on to the psychologist. Max felt slighted. She doesn't like my answers, he thought. They're too glib, even for her. What about the audience? Let's hear it out there . . .

"What about it, Dr. Brand? *Is* it socially positive?"

The psychologist was caught offguard. She stopped primping long enough to answer Camera One instead of the moderator.

"I think we live in overstimulated times," she said, moving right along. "We crave stimulation for its own sake. We gorge ourselves on it. We always want more, whether it's tactile or emotional or sexual. And I think that's bad."

Max jumped in. You're not just whistling Dixie, he thought. "Then why'd you wear that dress?"

"Sorry?"

He was fascinated by her fingernails, which were lacquered a deep scarlet, the color of arterial blood, pointed around the white length of her cigarette. She lowered the cigarette to her knee. No stockings, he noticed. And the slit on the side of her dress ran all the way up to—

He managed to recapture his concentration. "That dress. It's very stimulating. And it's red. You know what Freud would have said about that dress."

A faint, flirtatious tic curled the edge of her full mouth. She blinked her lidded eyes at him, forgetting the camera for the first time.

"And he would have been right," she said shamelessly. "I admit it," as if total honesty were her defense and salvation. "I live in a highly excited state of overstimulation."

And the truth shall make you free, thought Max.

He disregarded Rena, the audience, the prying cameras and turned ninety degrees, presenting his body to her.

"Listen . . ."

He felt ridiculous; the hell with it. Nicki Brand's image on the

monitor, the deepcut peekaboo Oriental neckline, the fetishistic chains—it was all too much. He gave up.

"I'd really like to take you out to dinner tonight," he said.

At his right side, Rena King squirmed.

Nicki batted her eyes. She was looking at the camera again.

Too bad for old Rena, thought Max. She's lost the last potential ally for her kneejerk Sunday supplement point of view. Old Brian What's-his-name didn't show tonight. He must be smarter than the rest of us. He has to be; he's a professor.

Nicki was sucking her cigarette down to the last millimeter of the wet, red tip.

Rena shuffled her notes.

"Professor O'Blivion, do *you* think erotic TV shows and violent TV shows lead to desensitization, to dehumanization?"

A tinny voice replied, *"The television screen has become the retina of the mind's eye."*

Spooked, Max spun around.

Incredibly, Rena was attempting to hold a conversation with the graying man on the TV monitor next to her.

Would electronic wonders never cease? Max's mind wandered again. He winked at Nicki.

"Yes?" said Rena, pretending to understand the professor's prepared answer.

"That's why I refuse to appear on television—except on television. It's an ethical imperative, I feel, if not a moral one. And of course O'Blivion is not the name I was born with. It's my television name. Soon we will all have special names, names designed to cause the cathode ray tube to resonate . . ."

"Yes."

It was the only comment Rena King could come up with. She was out of her league. The moderator swiveled back around, beads of flopsweat blossoming through the pancake makeup on her upper lip. Her eyes sparked.

"Dr. Brand, is Max Renn a menace to society?"

"I'm not sure." Nicki laughed, retrieving her hand and stubbing out the butt which Max had just used to light up one of his own. "He's certainly a menace to me."

Max stifled a laugh himself. He leaned an elbow on the back of his chair and feigned continuing interest in the show, stroking his temple thoughtfully with one finger.

Now he was sweating profusely. The lights were getting to him.

Beyond the hovering, dipping cameras, repositioning constantly, moving in for the moment of truth, he felt the unseen audience leaning forward, unsticking from their chairs in flames of static electricity, bending their necks out of morbid curiosity at the spectacle of a TV talk show moderator shriveling in a hot seat of her own design. The air onstage became grainy with rising smoke; the eyes of the cameras ran with reflections like melting glass under the glare. Max felt an oppressive tropical steaminess rising around him, as if the cement-block walls of the auditorium were beginning to soften under the force of humidity and exude moisture from their cracks, their very pores.

"Something I said?"

"No. It's just . . ." Max sought for a clever excuse. "Just the brain tumor."

"Oh. Is that all?"

"I think so."

"Show me where it is and I'll kiss it better."

"Here. Just below the belly button."

"Mm. I see it . . ."

He tried to get into it. But it wasn't easy. It should have been, but it wasn't.

Max heard the whispering of her red dress as she moved over him. He raised his head, tucking his chin into his chest, watching her.

A cool blue light washed in on them. The curtains of his apartment were not drawn, but the blinds screened the moon's cold rays, translating them into stripes of shrouded light and darkness. His body and the top of her head were illuminated only by a filtered mesh that looked uncomfortably like scan lines.

After an embarrassing period of time, Nicki gave up and sprawled onto her back.

"I didn't make it better," she said.

Max closed his eyes, but the gridwork of lines would not go away. A wind from nowhere blew through his chest.

"I think I'm getting weird." He sighed tiredly. "I didn't used to be weird."

Nicki kicked off her spike heels and raised to one elbow. "Well, don't fight it. It's kinda sexy, you know? Weirdness, I mean."

"Are you really a shrink?"

"I used to be. I think I've edged over into show biz—but don't tell my listeners that. I've got a radio show. Remember radio?"

“Is that the sort of advice you give? ‘Don’t fight it, it’s sexy’?”

“Stick around and find out. You might learn something.”

Max would not be moved from the vending machine until he had extracted a cupful of vile coffee that tasted like an unholy alliance of chicken soup and molé sauce. It wasn’t even hot. As he stood there in the hallway of her station, a procession of overly cheerful CRAM-FM employees passed him by, avoiding the machine like the plague.

He avoided them too, out of self-consciousness. He didn’t need to be recognized. His eyelids were still partially stuck together and his shirt clung to his body like ricepaper. It had been a long night.

He hid the cup in a trash can as though it were a bomb and moved on, following the sound of the live radio monitors until he had retraced his steps to the flashing red ON THE AIR sign.

He waved at Nicki through the glass window of the studio, giving her a thumbs-up sign.

She didn’t need the encouragement. She was working even harder than she had last night: not sitting but standing behind the control board, patching in her own calls, jumping between telephone lines and playing to her listeners’ questions with primal abandon, like some manic exercise leader.

She should be on television, he thought.

The purple sweat-band restraining her hair, the loose warm-up clothes, the pastel tennis shoes—he wondered if anyone had bothered to tell her that this was only radio. Maybe she wants it that way, he thought. So that no degree of self-consciousness can come between her and her listeners—her clients, in a sense. Do they imagine how much she’s putting into this? A hell of a lot more than Dr. Joyce Brothers. Why, it’s almost as therapeutic for her as it is for them; in fact, I don’t see how they could possibly be getting as much out of it as she is. It’s her morning psychodrama session, her release. It’s physical, almost sexual. He noticed the clock on the wall: 9:25. It’s her wake-up workout, he realized.

She must have been one repressed lady once, a long time ago, before she got into this. Otherwise she wouldn’t have gone to such extremes. But look at her now. It’s certainly worked for her. She’s a woman who doesn’t know what an inhibition is anymore, except in the clinical sense. She’s broken through.

That must be what turns me on.

“Get professional help,” she was crooning into the microphone with a full complement of body language. “I urge you, I beg you . . .”

“But it’s not me!” came the overwrought voice on the line. *“It’s my*

sister!”

“It’s not your sister, it’s *you,* lover, can’t you tell?”

She flashed her eyes at Max through the glass.

“Isn’t that why you called me? *You* want help, *you* need help. You’re going insane—I can hear you disintegrating while you talk to me, and I think you might end up hurting somebody. I think it might be your sister you’re going to hurt, and then it’s going to be you. You’re going to hurt you.”

Nicki Brand pulled out her neckline for ventilation and lowered her voice an octave.

“I’ve got your number, haven’t I?”

The speaker was overloaded with sobs. *“I hate my sister. I don’t want to, it’s ripping me up inside . . . but I do. I do!”*

Nicki selected another switch out of the rows of blinking lights. She hesitated before cutting the caller off. Her voice was almost kind; her tone was seductive, almost cruel.

“Will you call our Distress Center? Will you call the C-RAM Distress Center? They’ll tell you where to get help, lover. And you need it. You need it *now.”*

Her engineer held up a note.

She shot a glance at Max, motioning toward the clock. It was almost over. He understood. He nodded.

“I will. I will. I will. Thank you, Nicki. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you . . .”

Nicki did the sign-off for the segment, signaled to her engineer to shut down the board, and swept out of the tiny studio, a long-distance runner on the last leg of a cross-country marathon. Max caught up with her at her dressing room, drawn along for the ride like a wasp to honey.

“You’re more serious than you are on TV!” he shouted over the hissing of her shower.

She shut down the faucet, and Max heard her small feet slapping the tiles. He did not know whether she had heard him.

She poked her wet head out.

“I think it’s because I don’t have to worry about how I look on radio,” she said intensely, as if it really mattered. She swaddled herself in a large Turkish towel embroidered with her call letters and emerged from behind the room divider. He was relieved; for some reason the sound of her feet splashing through the water worried him. “But I’d *like* to be serious on TV.”

“Have you been auditioning for me?” he said, hoping to lighten the

mood.

"I'll do my show in the nude."

She said it without guile, reaching again for the clothes she had scattered on the way to the shower.

It was not that she was afraid of his eyes. She was as self-possessed as anyone he had ever seen. There was no need to return Max's gaze; they were talking about her, weren't they? It was clear that this was secretly her favorite topic, and perhaps the key to her success. Most importantly, she had taken the next step, transcending conceit; she simply saw everyone else's problems as an extension of her own. Which was the manifestation either of an extraordinary level of compassion or of a breathtaking megalomania.

She was also a bit of a closet exhibitionist.

"I know 'the nude' when I see it," he said. "That's not 'the nude'."

She smiled, satisfied. Her towel enclosed her like a self-addressed envelope. Without looking up, as if still on the air, she said, "I sense that you're deeply troubled. C'mon, lover, what is it? What's troubling you?"

Max moved toward her through the mist that now filled the room.

"The nude, Dr. Brand. I'm troubled by the nude."

Nicki dropped the towel. Her skin was pink and tender. Steam rose from her body; it snaked upward from her glistening limbs as though from the pores of her skin, coiling in his hair and eyelashes. His vision blurred in the moist, grainy air, then sharpened dramatically.

"Well," said Nicki Brand, looking at him at last, "I'm afraid you're just going to have to confront your problem . . ."

She opened her arms.

"Join me?"

"What I'd really like to ask Mr. Renn is . . . considering the kinds of things he likes to pollute the airways with . . . I'd like to know . . . were you a weird kid?"

"I was a pretty ordinary kid, actually," said Max, adjusting his headphones. "At least that's what my mother says."

"Really? Completely ordinary?"

Max covered his microphone and said to Nicki, "He sounds disappointed."

Nicki pressed the cough button, taking them off the air temporarily. "Remember," she said, "this is show biz."

She released the button.

Max rubbed his face. "Well, let's see. I, uh, I used to dream in video.

That was after we got our first TV set, of course." He shrugged, a gesture lost to the anonymous male caller. "I don't know how weird that is."

He pressed the cough button himself. "I'm afraid the show's going down the toilet," he said to Nicki.

"Let me be the judge of that. Trust me. You're getting warm—you're on to something. Don't oppose the strangeness in yourself. It's the only part that's awake."

He released the button.

"How do you dream in video?" the caller was saying.

"Oh, it's like a normal dream. Except that it feels like you're watching TV. You see the lines, you feel the cathode ray tube, there's some static . . . It still happens, only now it's in color."

The caller pounced.

"I'd like to ask Dr. Brand how she would interpret that. I personally think it's pretty strange."

Who's doing the analyzing here? wondered Max. I thought—but I guess it doesn't matter what I thought. Nicki's running things; this isn't my time. Maybe she had it planned this way all along; maybe it's all part of the big show.

Nicki addressed the caller, not entirely off the top of her head, though it was supposed to seem that way. She's good, he thought wryly. She sure is.

Now her eyes never left Max's face.

"It's possible that Mr. Renn is a little distanced from the workings of his own subconscious mind. Perhaps he can only allow this dream material to rise to the surface if it comes as light entertainment—nothing to be taken seriously. The id as sitcom."

"Very elegant, Doctor," said Max. He squeezed the back of her leg under the table. "My compliments to the chef."

"Well, I watch Channel 83 a lot, Nicki, and after listening to Mr. Renn, I have to say I think he needs professional help. Real soon."

Max was edgy despite the façade of goodwill. It was such a tiny, oppressive studio. He was getting claustrophobic. He needed—something.

"We *all* need help, lover," said Nicki, turning on the charm again, "and that's what I'm here for. I'm Dr. Nicki Brand, and my lines are open for any more calls to Max Renn of Channel 83, Civic TV. Don't let him get away with it, whatever it is. He's here to talk to you right now."

Part Two:

The Electrified Bunker

Chapter Four

A black man in an orange hospital gown was dragged across a room by two men in black hoods.

The room was familiar.

So was the red clay wall.

The soft wall.

The man was screaming.

“When does the plot start to unravel? Who’s the black guy? Political prisoner?”

“There is no plot. It goes on like that for an hour.”

“Goes on like what?”

“Like that,” said Harlan. He remained uninterested, studying a schematic instead.

Behind him, on the monitor, the black man’s arms were practically torn out of their sockets as his wrists were yanked up to the wall and locked into manacles.

“Torture,” said Harlan flatly, describing what he must have seen enough of the first time; more than enough. “Murder. Mutilation.” He might have been describing a sporting event. “Here. Take the other tape home, if you like it that much. We’ve picked up three now.” He tapped a cassette.

Onscreen, one of the hooded figures produced a crude lash fashioned from several strands of barbed wire.

“We never leave that room?” asked Max.

“No. It’s a real sicko.”

“It’s brilliant.”

“Is it?” The victim’s hospital gown fell open at the back, revealing crawling, sweating skin. At the first fall of the lash the gown shredded. “For perverts only.”

Max remained riveted to the screen. “Absolutely brilliant.” He heard Harlan snort. “Look, I mean there’s almost no production cost—and you can’t take your eyes off it. It—it’s incredibly realistic. Where do they get actors who can do that?”

“Actors?”

“Yeah, actors. What else? I mean, this has got to be some bizarro commercial transmission . . .”

"Think so?" said Harlan. "Think it's the new NBC Movie-of-the-Week?"

"No, of course not, but—"

"You know better than that, Max. You don't stage anything like that for a network. Not even for cable. Too rough. And that's the understatement of all time."

"It could be a movie off pay TV, one of those R-rated . . ."

"Guess again, *patrón.*"

"Come on, Harlan, I've never seen photography that was so realistic, so—"

"Photography? What photography?"

Max bristled. "What are you trying to tell me? That you've got real, live little people trapped inside this glass picture tube—homunculi in a bottle, right, like in *DR. CYCLOPS?* And when you turn on the juice they start-to dance, to beat each other to death?"

"Where's the camerawork, *patrón?* There is no camerawork. No movement. No editing. It's one reel after another without a break."

"All right, so it's *vérité* footage. I don't care how it was made. I only know—"

"Vérité footage, eh? Listen to yourself. If it's real atrocity footage, you don't want to know where it comes from? Do you know what you're saying?"

"I don't believe it's real, Harlan. It can't be real, Harlan. We both know that."

"It's a hoax, then?"

"It's a hoax. Okay? It's a hoax." Max cocked a suspicious eye. "Is someone paying you to play devil's advocate with me?"

"Sure," said Harlan, unfazed. He tinkered with a pair of wire strippers. "It's called reverse psychology."

"Just don't forget who you really work for."

"I won't."

"What is it you get out of all this? What is it you really want, my job?" You could almost handle it, thought Max. You watch even more TV than I do.

"Why would I want your job?"

"Power."

Harlan whistled. "You don't have any power, Max. Not *real* power. You can't even program what you want without clearing it with the Board." The technician felt behind him for the controls to the tape machine. "Not that I blame you," he said in a more sympathetic voice. "Or them. It would probably do more harm than good in the long run.

Besides, we're not even sure what we're dealing with here."

Max stopped him from turning off the tape. "Which leaves us with the same unanswered questions. Where do they get people, actors, whatever they are, to do something like this? It's worth checking out whether we use it or not. Did you have trouble locking onto it this time?"

"Not after I realized the Malaysia delay was a plant."

"It's not coming from Malaysia?"

"Can't fool the Prince of Pirates for long."

"Harlan. Harlan! Where's it coming from?"

"Pittsburgh. That's in the USA."

"Pittsburgh?"

"Pittsburgh."

Max reconsidered the screen. Now it was even more difficult to believe. Presently he had to turn away. He stood to leave. "I'm going to take the day off," he announced.

"I thought you just got here."

"The rest of the day, then." He tore his eyes from the monitor. "A hoax," he said. "It's got to be. Let's keep telling ourselves that."

"Whatever you say, *patrón.*"

Max picked up the third tape. "But keep on it, at least for the time being. Maybe we can find out something."

"Like what?"

"I wish I knew." Max highstepped over a snaking cable and found his way out.

"It has a title now, by the way," called Harlan.

Max stopped in his tracks.

"It's supered for a few seconds at the end of this transmission. No credits. Just one word. VIDEODROME."

"Video-what?"

"You know, like hippodrome. Only video."

"VIDEODROME," said Max. "From Pittsburgh."

He closed the door behind him. But the screaming wouldn't stop.

* * *

Max rode the service elevator and let himself out the back way. From the alley he could barely make out Harlan's pirate receiving dish on the roof of the building, behind the air-conditioning ventilators. From the front the overhanging Civic TV signboard blocked it from street view. But if anyone from the Broadcasting Commission came nosing

around . . .

He'd have to get Harlan to string up some more advertising banners, maybe some mock antennas, for camouflage. Either that or wait for the pigeons to do the job for him.

He telephoned Bridey from the apartment. He told her to run interference for him the rest of the afternoon. He wasn't feeling well. His head.

Did he need anything? She'd be glad to stop by on her way home from . . .

No. Thanks anyway. Nothing wrong with him that a little remedial sleep couldn't cure.

He drew the curtains, hit the sheets and tried to rest.

But his mind would not slow down.

It was very late by the time Nicki arrived.

He mixed drinks while she puttered around the apartment. This visit she did not miss a thing. Probably looking to rearrange the room, he thought. And my life. And uncover a skeleton or two while she's at it. Snooping and organizing. It was always an irresistible challenge. Especially since the clutter in his place wasn't a come-on. It was authentic. The women he'd known had undoubtedly seen it as a cry for help.

He came back into the living room.

"Got any porno?" she said, poking through an old cardboard carton. She said it as casually as another woman might ask for two aspirins or an extra bathrobe.

"You serious?"

"Yeah. Gets me in the mood." She held Harlan's latest tape under the lamp. "What's this? 'VIDEODROME.' "

Max tried to distract her with the drink. It didn't work. "Torture and murder."

"Sounds great!" said Nicki, dropping the cassette into the player.

Max sank to the couch, amazed.

She is, he thought, that rarest of individuals: someone utterly unencumbered by moral qualms of any kind. At least none that I've seen so far. She's completely separated her intellect from her animal nature and is able, apparently, to live comfortably with the dichotomy. Professionally she may be one thing, but privately . . .

Or perhaps she has not divided herself at all. Perhaps both sides have become one. Totally, so that there is no seam. I wonder. I should listen more closely to the things she says.

One thing is certain. Her behavior is so far to the left that she makes

me defensive. Or is it the right? He couldn't make up his mind. Probably neither, he thought. She's above anything as mundane as politics. Or so she thinks.

"It ain't exactly sex," he warned, half-teasing, as she set up the tape.

"Says who? Sex covers a lot of ground."

"I guess that's true," he said. "Depending on how you go about it."

She started the tape, then came slinking melodramatically over to the couch and draped herself across him.

He waited for the tape to begin.

She stretched restlessly, sinuating herself over his lap, then sat up, alert.

The vortex of snow on the screen dissipated to reveal the same angle as before, the same room. And the same wall.

A South American boy and a Chinese woman were dragged forward in chains. The hooded torturers' boots splashed.

"God," said Nicki, "I don't believe it!"

Max disengaged from her, relieved. "I'll turn it off."

"No! No, it's okay. I can take it."

They watched, silenced by the screams, as the woman was strung up. She was naked. Then, very slowly and deliberately—

"Can you get it any clearer?"

Max sighed. "It's a pirate tape. They scramble it."

"Mmm. I like it." The way she said it, it sounded like a compliment.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it turns me on." She spoke rapidly, her breath shallow. "Take out your Swiss army knife and cut me. Here. Just a little."

She bared one shoulder, lifting her hair from the nape of her neck.

He wasn't sure how to take it. She kept him wondering. Maybe that was the essence of the attraction. He never knew how serious she was. She seemed to be constantly on the move, circling in an emotional holding pattern, unsure herself where she would next set down.

He was even more surprised by what he saw now.

There, on the pale skin of her shoulder, just below her black-and-white necklace were several parallel lines, like scratches, freshly cut.

By now the Chinese woman had been flogged until her body was covered with long, bleeding weals. She was near unconsciousness. But still she screamed on.

"Looks like somebody beat me to it," said Max.

"Mmm. Yes. Beat me to it. Please."

"No, really. What are these? I didn't see them yesterday."

“I wonder how you get to be a contestant on this show?”

“I don’t know. Nobody seems to come back next week.” He wanted to touch the back of her neck, wanted to soothe it with a kiss, but was afraid of hurting her. She left it exposed. “What did you say happened to your shoulder?”

“A friend,” she said. “I think he’d like VIDEODROME.”

The first mention. Now it all comes out, he thought. There was always another “friend.” How could it be otherwise? He should have known.

He felt a pang of jealousy. Was she taunting him? Or was it merely her brand of honesty? Perhaps that was the most powerful come-on of all.

“You let somebody cut you?”

“Uh-huh,” she said sweetly. She batted her eyes at him. “Well, what do you think?”

“Uh, I don’t know . . .” It was hot in the apartment and getting hotter all the time. He unstuck himself from the couch and sat forward.

“Want to try a few things?” she asked.

“I . . . don’t know.” He really didn’t. His mouth was dry. Where was that drink? “You might have to stay on radio if it gets out of hand.”

“Radio’s been good to me. I like it because it’s so free. It’s liberating. It allows your mind to make anything you want of it. Or need. But there’s always VIDEODROME. C’mon, lover,” she said smoothly, pouring herself over him. “You could start with, um, nail clippers and work your way up to razor blades.”

He pulled back, afraid. He wasn’t sure of what.

“Uh, no. I think I just feel like talking dirty.”

She laughed, playing along for the moment. “ ‘No’ is the dirtiest thing I’ve ever heard. Kiss me and say it again, would you?”

“No,” he said, nuzzling her. “No.” The television played on, the image flowing with red. “No.” The screams were almost given over to unconsciousness. “No.” Nicki clung to him, every muscle in her body coming awake. He felt her breath hot in his ear. He held her too tightly. Yes, he forced himself to think, yes. Come to me, Nicki. I need you. I need something. Yes, you’re what I need. I need to know that you’re here for me. I need to know that you’re real, that you’re possible. He closed his eyes as the room and everything in it, including Nicki Brand, began to strobe red. *“No,”* he said.

As soon as he entered the marginally organized chaos of the Civic TV

building the next morning, he felt his nervous system winding up tight as a violin string.

His senses opened too wide. His eyes dilated and his lids raised another degree, letting in more light than he could bear so early; he was assaulted by playbacks of advertising jingles and pressurized conversations sounding through the concrete channels of the complex as through the amplifying canals of some gigantic model of a human head; his skin tingled with a hypersensitivity that was near pain as he brushed against employees busy on their appointed rounds, nearly all of whom seemed to be hopelessly behind schedule and dangerously close to panic; he smelled the synthetic bouquets of perfume and cologne still fresh at this hour, like the close, nauseatingly aromatic cloud with which one was invariably greeted upon arrival at a funeral in progress; and a nasty, metallic taste flowed from his mouth, making his sour stomach growl in protest. He had forgotten to brush his teeth again, and to shave. The grain of his stubbled face felt like a mask of rudely hammered base metal.

He was not ready.

He followed the corridor to an all-too-familiar junction. There a compulsively ordered desk stood out in the midst of the activity like an oasis at the edge of a battlefield.

Bridey, he thought as he marched numbly forward, as through the trenches to review his troops. Save me. The neurological floodgates are about to be forced open the rest of the way, and then there will be no turning back. For the next few hours there will be no escape. You know how to help me. Don’t you?

As soon as he revealed himself, several polyestered bodies separated from the flock and descended like vultures, authorizations in hand and pens at the ready, as hypertense as lawyers who had camped out all night to obtain last-minute reprieves.

The secretary jumped up to meet him. She ignored her telephone and went into action, steering him by the sleeve to the nearest door.

“Max, thank God you’re here. Masha Borowczyk has been waiting in your office for an hour. What were you doing last night? Didn’t you get my message?”

Masha? he thought. *Masha.* Oh, no . . .

He saw the hordes of lackeys drawing nearer, about to surround him. He wanted to sink from sight and come in again the back way. Or, better yet, to go home and back to bed where it was safe. But there was no choice. There was only one door in sight. The door to his own office.

“I don’t think I’m ready for this,” he informed her.

Efficiently, using the fewest possible moves, Bridey inserted her own half-empty cup of coffee into his right hand, her own half-smoked cigarette into his left.

“Coffee,” instructed Bridey. “Cigarette.” She aimed him toward the office and set him moving with a gentle push between the shoulder blades. “Masha. Go. She’s hot to trot.”

Chapter Five

The door whispered shut behind him.

He could still hear the frantic voices outside, but at least they were fainter now. Here the light was dimmer, more nearly bearable. The blinds had not yet been drawn up.

He bumped a reassuring piece of furniture and stepped over a pile of reports that littered the floor like familiar land mines. He stuck the cigarette to his lip and removed his dark glasses. He could make out enough of the clutter to relax slightly. It was his own office, all right. Just like home.

He took a deep breath, and inhaled an infusion of face powder and floral toilet water.

“Masha,” he said, turning to where he knew she would be. “I’m glad you could—”

“Max, it’s so beautiful to see you!”

She abandoned the couch, marked his cheek with lipstick. A dainty handkerchief unfurled like white wings in front of his face as she tried to wipe off the smear. She drew back and combed his hair away from his forehead with her fingers, straightening the collar of his tan jacket as if he were a small boy. Satisfied at last, she presented him with a full frontal view of herself, complete with fake leopard skin suit and hennaed pincurls.

“But Max, you look terrible.” She let her voice fall like a mother who has been betrayed by her own son. “Tired, exhausted . . .”

Max felt inexplicably guilty. Just what I need, he thought. He decided he couldn’t go on with it. He backed to the door.

Masha read his intention immediately and saved herself by shifting to another approach.

“But excited,” she cooed, “alive! I can see it behind the fatigue. So . . . no. You look great. How are you?”

She was so transparent. And yet there remained something touching about her pathetic efforts at old-world charm, even though they were only for the purpose of misdirecting him from the hustle.

He nodded resignedly and allowed her to lead him to the couch, where she plumped herself up next to him and rummaged in her ornate purse for a Turkish cigarette.

“I’m great,” she announced, as she lit up and French-inhaled a tendril of the foul smoke.

He made a brave effort to ignore the odor. “It’s good to see you, too.”

“You have a hangover?”

“I stayed up late watching TV.”

“Ahh.” She fluttered her eyelids closed and emitted a contented sound. Then, as if revived by the acrid smoke, she lifted her lids and their burden of caked mascara and said in an altogether businesslike tone, “Max.”

He crossed his legs and faced her, feigning interest.

“Two words,” said the woman. “Ready?”

Max nodded without expectation.

She said the secret words. “Apollo. Dionysus.”

Max frowned.

“Exciting?”

His own—Bridey’s—cigarette was down to the filter and burning his fingers. He put it out and patted his pockets for another. He had none. He considered one of Masha’s Turkish ovals. But the one she was sipping from smelled like burning hair. The smokescreen was scraping his throat raw.

“Uh.” He sampled the coffee. It was black, the way he liked it. “Maybe. Greeks, weren’t they?”

“Max. Don’t joke. Two shows.” She held up a pair of fingers as a visual aid. “They go together like this.” She entwined her fingers to mimic gnarled legs in contraction over the pallid crotch of her knuckles.

“I have to buy both of them?”

“You will *beg* me to sell you both of them.” She elevated her chin with thespian extravagance. “Apollo: hard, aloof, cruel.” Her face distended lasciviously, cracking the groundcover of her makeup. “Dionysus: drunken, sensual, orgiastic . . .”

She crowded him on the couch, leering like a madam.

“See them. *Now.*”

He had no choice but to humor her. It was the only way he was going to get through it.

The Board Room was on the other side of a connecting door. He led her to a comfortable seat, drew the blinds closed and switched on the VCR.

She took two tapes out of her purse and left her seat to insert the first one for him, adjusting the color and volume with a perfectionist’s

care. He sat back and awaited her presentation. He had seen enough of her tapes to know what to expect. The sooner it was over with the better.

He settled into the cushions and did his best to remain interested. There was always hope. Wasn't there?

Unfortunately the first show was as shabby as he feared.

Togas that had, until a few days ago, served as bedsheets in a cheap hotel room. Actors with sideburns and wristwatches. Doric columns fashioned from cardboard tubes covered in butcher paper. A Grecian urn with a Hong Kong dragon stenciled onto its surface. The togas fell away soon enough, but only in soft focus.

Masha pretended not to watch his face as she sat forward in rapt attention and picked flecks of tobacco from her tongue.

Max caught a few seconds of microsleep while the tape unreeled. No matter; the action never progressed beyond the puerile. The same mismatched bodies continued their simulations behind the same out-of-focus vases. Which was just as well. The "actor" who was impersonating Apollo had pimples on his back; even through a diffusion lens his shoulders resembled the craters of the moon.

Time passed. The clock hummed high and white on the wall.

The second tape was no better. Max fast-forwarded with his remote control, accelerating the lackluster action into a Keystone Kops two-reeler. He tried not to laugh and swallowed a yawn. It was like a high school pageant version of the *Satyricon.* Both tapes had been shot silent with a track of Viennese waltz music dubbed in later. Dutifully he dipped into the tape again and again at various points, but the tinkling music box repeated endlessly, like the powdered and rouged bodies which moved to its mechanical strains as if underwater.

"Masha," he asked at last, "does it ever get good?"

"It's all good. Max, tell me. Which one do you identify with? Apollo with his nobility of purpose, his controlling intelligence? Or Dionysus with his unleashed excesses, his insatiable urges? Don't let me influence your opinion, but personally I find . . ."

"Personally I don't see any difference."

"But Max! They're distinct personalities."

"Two sides of the same coin. In the end, they both behave exactly alike. Well, don't they? So where's the distinction? Given the same setting, the same temptations . . ."

"Mm-*hmm.* I see, I see. Like Jekyll and Hyde, in other words?" She leaned in slyly, playing him out. "Tell me, though. Which side would you *prefer* to be?"

"Depends on the time of day," Max snapped. "Right now I'm

supposed to be on my best behavior. But old Mr. Touchie-Feelie won't give up the ghost. He's still there. He's always trying to get his licks in, one way or another."

Masha spoke intensely. "You must let him, Max. Give him permission to realize his potential. Suppress him and he may reveal himself at what you would call an inopportune time."

She sounded like a Model-T Freudian. He had heard it all before.

"I'm trying, Masha," he said impatiently, "I'm trying. But if I let myself have too many dreams before, say, four o'clock in the afternoon, I'd never get my work done."

"But that *is* your work, isn't it, Max? Dreams? Be honest with yourself. And what I'm offering you is the perfect integration of the twin halves of the eternal duality, light and darkness, the yin and the yang . . ."

He held up his hand. The bull was really flying now, too thick and fast for him to deal with it any longer in abstract terms. He rubbed his eyes.

"It doesn't work that way, behaviorally speaking," he said. "I wish it did. But it doesn't. If it did, the Catholic Church would have gone out of business centuries ago. People go one way at any given time or they go the other. It's a choice. A man can't have his shit and eat it, too, to coin a phrase. I wish I could. But I can't."

God knows I've tried, he thought. That's what's tearing me apart.

But I'm beginning to sound like some firehouse sociologist myself.

He stopped himself.

Masha would not give up, however. She said, "The two have kept each other alive since the beginning of civilization. The sun and the moon, the flame burning more brightly over the water. They feed each other." She took a breath. "And now, today, with my latest production, you have before you . . ."

Max killed the tape and the ludicrous morality play withered to a dot on the screen, an eye racing away down a tunnel, growing more vivid at the last just before it disappeared completely.

"But there's no edge to it. You know what I mean, *the edge?* Masha, darling, I'm looking for something a lot more . . ." He sought for a word that might ring a bell in her decadent mind. "More contemporary." There, that was the ticket. Perhaps, if he pointed it out to her tactfully enough, she could be reminded that she was living in the last quarter of the twentieth century. "I want something that will show people what's really going on under the sheets. This stuff is too—too nice. Too sweet. Like you, darling."

Masha's expression was neither nice nor sweet. She dispatched

another lipstick-stained cigarette butt to the ashtray. “Well,” she said, “it’s your market. *Darling.”*

“You know a show called VIDEODROME?”

“Video-what?” She eyed him suspiciously, as if he had broken an unspoken rule and mentioned the name of one of her rivals.

“D-R-O-M-E. Like, you know, video circus, video arena? You’ve heard of it?”

“No.”

“It’s just torture and murder. No plot, no characters. Very, very realistic. I think it’s what’s next.”

“Then God help us,” she said wearily, in her most dramatic *fin de siècle* tone.

“Better on TV than in the streets.”

Masha rose unsteadily.

He was suddenly struck through with pity, even compassion for her. The old ways were changing, too rapidly for her to keep up. Soon she would be obsolete. Her customers, like Civic TV, were moving on; before long she would have no one to hustle.

He could not picture her riding out the rest of her days in a home for out-of-work procuresses. He could offer her something, couldn’t he? A crumb, a bone? Besides, she might turn out to be of some use to him, after all, in a very tangible way. She had been in this field a long time, longer than anyone else he knew. We can do each other a favor, he thought.

He called after her. “You interested in tracking it down for me? I’ll see that you get the agency commission.”

She turned back, renewed hope coloring her cheeks. “I’m interested.”

Money talks, he thought sadly. “We think it comes from Pittsburgh.”

“Let me try.” She retrieved her cassettes, her mind racing ahead to a new scheme. “Max . . .”

“Yeah?” Why did he feel that he was still being manipulated?

“Did you ever think of producing your own show? Right here? I could be your agent. Worldwide. I could sell subterranean for you everywhere.”

“No. I don’t have the temperament.”

Masha dug in. “But if you did, what kind of show would you do? I mean for the subterranean market. Would you do VIDEODROME?”

Max smiled uncertainly, toying with the idea. Purely hypothetically, of course. But no. It was crazy.

“I guess we’ll never know,” he said.

But even after she had gone, he couldn't get the question out of his mind.

Max came out of the kitchen balancing two drinks. He had intended to make them stiff—but not this stiff. The glasses were overfull, dripping in rivulets from his wrists. Or was it only that his hands were shaking?

It had been another long day.

"Why do we always end up at my place?" He navigated around a sagging carton of tapes. "I'm not set up to entertain."

"I guess it's 'cause we both love the slums," Nicki deadpanned.

He set the drinks on the coffee table and bobbed his head to sip one down to a reasonable level. Disturbing pools of liquid formed around the bases of the glasses, staining the tabletop a dark color.

"Sexy-crazy?" said Nicki.

Max looked up.

She had opened a small case from her purse and was holding up a pair of earrings.

He took one, examined it. It was gold, very light, but with a stinger. The screw pin in back pricked his finger, drawing blood.

"These are for pierced ears," he said, sucking his finger. Then he touched the small lobe beneath her ear, a delicate curl of flesh as pink and unique as a seashell. His finger left a red smudge behind. "Your ears aren't pierced."

"Not yet." She produced an oblong box from her purse and said coyly, "Doing anything tonight?"

So it began.

He milked his finger, squeezing out another thickening drop, another. It tasted warm and metallic, like her teeth when she chewed his lips. She had taught him that. And as always VIDEODROME replayed soundlessly in the background, as ubiquitous now as electronic wallpaper. He had long ago stopped watching it.

But not Nicki.

She drew him out and into her until he was able to give up for a time and float beyond the normal boundaries. Pleasure that flirted with pain, pain that became pleasure . . . that was her thing, apparently. And who could say she was wrong? In a world of pre-programmed options, something—*something*—was required to restore the edge, the sharpness. For the first time he began to comprehend the logic of it.

She was the doctor, wasn't she? She was. He reminded himself of that as they lay by the electronic hearth with its flickering, endlessly

repeating patterns of humiliation and submission, of nerve endings lashed into heightened states, of blood hammering in a quickening flow that was fast and hot and could no longer be stemmed.

They lay together again, fitting as perfectly as spoons, his skin now flushed dark as hers in the glow from the screen. He measured the length and curve of her body; beneath his impatient fingers her pulse speeded visibly on the taut drumhead of her abdomen. He moved his hand back up to her collarbone, the gentle indentations there, the tangle of hair spilling over her shoulders, the bleached streak, the graceful shape of her skull . . .

She was not asleep.

Without opening her eyes she directed his hand to the small box she had carried to the pillows. His fingers found its outline, pried it open, felt what was inside.

A thin length of cold steel.

A hatpin.

The red bead on the end of it attracted him, a round, staring eye.

He knew what she wanted.

He held back for only a moment.

Then he set to work.

He held her head with one hand, cupping the back of her neck. He drew the point of the needle from its protective cork and raised it to the purifying flame of a candle, then made the first thrust. He pushed hesitantly at first, then more forcefully as he found his courage. The trick was not to stop until it was done. The skin of her ear stretched. He was about to withdraw and give up. Then he broke through.

She did not make a sound.

He pulled the needle out and bridged over her. She slid under him, presenting him with the other side of her face. He switched the cork and needle to her right ear and pushed steadily. This time the skin broke almost immediately. She moaned as he penetrated and slid through several inches, moving in place as though performing an act of pure love.

He nuzzled the wisps of hair at her temple. He set the needle aside, daubed Scotch on her ears and sucked them clean, as the breath hissed through her teeth and the air became red.

His eyes focused past her to the video background behind their heads.

Onscreen, the red room was empty. The moist, sweating wall framed by manacles was dark and waiting.

But that wasn't right.

He had seen the tape many times. The young couple. They were always there, from the opening seconds. As he watched, the lighting intensified until the room was a ripe blood-red. He could almost feel its heat.

He shook his head to clear his eyes and looked down at Nicki, trapped beneath him. Her complexion was flushed, livid.

It matched his own color.

He felt her fingernails. No. It was only beads of perspiration popping out on his skin and rolling down to the small of his back. He lifted from her and saw now the pools of condensation forming like heat mirages around the cushions. The floor melted and sloshed with electrified water. The dark walls of his apartment seemed to close in, the ceiling lowering, reflecting the flickering of the candles like the phosphors of a television image: warm, deeper than orange, and finally red as a darkroom. The sofa and furniture blurred into insubstantial shadows, then fell away completely, leaving them naked under the light of the red room . . .

Nicki stirred and rolled against him.

He shut his eyes and arched, pinioning her to the floor. Her fingers laced his. He kissed her ears, her mouth, her neck, burying himself, moving faster, ignoring the texture of a hard, sweating gridwork beneath his knees, the charged water all around, dangerously close, the sound of her breathing in his ear like the echo of his own breath bouncing off the walls of a cell, closing in, nearer and nearer.

He waited to hear the slogging approach of heavy boots. But they did not come. Not this time.

He stretched as Nicki lolled next to him. I don't know how she keeps going, he thought. I'm exhausted.

She sighed. "Mmm. I've created a Frankenstein," she teased, inserting the wires of her earrings through the new holes.

Max watched her come awake next to his limp body. Except for her earlobes and the cuts which he knew were healing on the back of one shoulder, all of her that he could see was perfect. In fact she looked healthier than ever; her skin glowed.

"You can bring me to life any time, Doctor," he said.

He smiled at the possibility.

She sat up, reached for her underwear and slipped back into her bra.

"Max?"

"Yeah?"

“I’m going away tomorrow. For two weeks.” She waited, but he wouldn’t take the bait. She rehooked the clasp and unrolled the straps. “Guess where?”

He made a guess to please her. “L.A.”

“Pittsburgh,” she said. She sounded happy about it. Or maybe she only wanted him to think that.

“Fabulous,” he said. “Don’t stay in the sun too long. I hear it’s bad for the skin.”

“No, c’mon. Isn’t that where they make VIDEODROME?”

All at once he felt cold. “Yeah,” he said, trying not to let it show. “Why?”

“I’m gonna audition. I was made for that show.” She smiled at him cryptically.

She would say anything to keep him off-balance, he decided. The more outrageous the better. But he was determined not to give her the advantage.

“Nobody on earth was made for that show,” he said guardedly.

She reached for the rest of her clothing, eyes down. She was not smiling.

He felt a chill, as if someone had walked over his grave.

“Hey. Listen to me.” When she continued to ignore him he moved closer and spoke directly into her face. He softened his voice to get her to look at him. *“Listen to me.”*

“What?” she said innocently.

She was taunting him, all right. Words were one thing. And games were games. But how far was she willing to push it? What did she really want from him?

Could be it’s not me she’s after at all. I might not have anything to do with it. What, then?

“I want you to stay away from it. Those mondo-weirdo video guys. They’ve got unsavory connections. They play rough.” She was ignoring him. She’s not naive, he thought. She can’t be. Then it dawned on him: he had not understood until this moment how truly reckless she was. He was appalled. He grabbed her arm. “Rougher than even Nicki Brand wants to play,” he said angrily.

“Sounds like a challenge,” she said. Defiantly.

He quit. I’m not going to play, he thought. This is not a game.

“Got a cigarette?” she said.

She’s not a girl. And I’m not in high school; we’re not arguing over the Senior Prom. She’s an adult, a highly competent professional. Is it possible that she doesn’t know what might be involved here?

"It's not a challenge," he said calmly. He lit a cigarette for her. "You know, in Brazil, Central America, those kinds of places, making underground video is considered a subversive act. They execute people for it. In Pittsburgh . . . who knows?"

He hoped he'd gotten through. She doesn't want to talk about it anymore. Neither do I. She's reconsidering. Thank God. Go to Pittsburgh, he thought. I wouldn't want to interfere with your career. Only don't—

"Max?"

"Hm?"

He watched her drag methodically on the cigarette until it was a red-hot ember. Then, as if this was part of a test she'd had in mind to perform as soon as she was sure she'd found a receptive audience, she inverted the cigarette and lowered it to her chest.

Her eyes were looking at him.

"Nicki, don't!"

Before he could get to her she touched the cigarette to the top of her breast, an inch above the black lace cup. There was a sizzling and the sharp smell of burning flesh.

She threw her head back and let out a short, orgasmic gasp.

"Nicki," he said helplessly, quick tears springing to his eyes. "Don't . . . don't!"

She smiled, then took another drag and passed the cigarette back to him.

Without taking her eyes off him, she lay back and said, "You can bring me to life any time now, Doctor."

Chapter Six

He observed the belly dancer bumping her way between the tables, beating out an ancient and insistent rhythm on the tiny brass cymbals which seemed to grow from her fingers.

The dancer slithered toward the circular stairway that led down to the lower levels, and her gauzy veil whipped over the tablecloth in front of him. As the veil jerked aside, Max saw that Masha was avoiding his gaze; she ignited another Turkish oval and coughed out a cloud of smoke as solid and opaque as ectoplasm. The smoke snaked away to the ceiling and Masha came back into focus, squinting at him across the table and peeling bits of tobacco from her tongue.

“Another hangover?” she asked.

Max’s eyes went back to the dancer, who was wriggling her way to the main floor of the restaurant. The soft skin bulging out of her halter vibrated to the Greek music.

“Stayed up late watching TV again,” he said. “So? Business is bad?”

“What makes you think that?”

“You look shaky. Exhausted. You hustle too much for a woman your age.”

“Funny.” Masha set her gold cigarette lighter upright and caressed its length. “I thought it was keeping me young.”

“Then maybe it’s something else.” He peered down through the wrought-iron railing at the main floor. The dancer’s body bounced and writhed faster and faster, her flesh one with the music. “You got in touch with our friends in Pittsburgh?”

Masha blew another smokescreen through the frayed border of the black feather boa around her neck. “In a way. At a distance.”

She leaned in for emphasis and lowered her voice despite the tide of bouzoukee music in the background.

“Max . . . VIDEODROME is something for you to leave alone. It is definitely not for public consumption.”

Max laughed humorlessly. “Channel 83 is a little small to be considered public.”

“It’s still too public.” Her voice was a whisper. “Do you understand me?”

“No. What is it? What’s the punchline?”

"I think it's dangerous, Max, VIDEODROME."

"Why? It's Mafia? They do business."

"It's more . . . how can I say? More *political* than that."

"Come on, Masha. What are we talking about?"

"VIDEODROME . . . what you see on that show . . . it's for real. It's not acting. It's—snuff TV."

"Snuff? Where did you learn that?"

Masha glared at him. Her eyes protruded. "Don't you condescend. I sold the first snuff films from Argentina to Wundercable in Switzerland. I knew the word before you did." She was shaking. Her cigarette touched the side of her cut crystal glass and a shower of sparks hit the tablecloth. "But that was all fake. VIDEODROME is for real."

"I don't believe it."

A burst of applause resounded below. As the belly dancer bowed, Max noticed caches of dirty dollar bills folded into the cleavage of her top and pressed under the elastic of her waistband. So her sensual display was all for profit, and the bearded customers knew it. They leered after her as she stole away from the floor. Max shook his head.

"So," said Masha coldly, leaning away. "Don't believe it."

"Why do it for real?" Max reasoned. "It's easier and safer to fake it."

"Because . . . it has something that you don't have, Max," said Masha disdainfully. "It has a philosophy. And that is what makes it dangerous."

"Whose philosophy?"

"I . . . don't know. I made sure I wouldn't know."

"Who's selling it?"

Masha refused to answer.

"Who's buying?"

Her voice remained a whisper. "There is no buying and selling of VIDEODROME."

"Tell them I'm interested."

"Maxie," she said somberly, the crest of her turban dipping low, "you're not."

"Okay, *I'll* tell them I'm interested. Find me a name to talk to."

She refused to look at him.

"Masha, Masha, you know me. I stay away from the scary stuff."

"Max." She sighed. "You are going to have to be nice to me for this."

"We can take a shower together. Any time you say."

Masha's worn mouth widened in amusement. "I'm sure you would be very beautiful . . ."

A lithe waiter appeared with Masha's coffee. He had layered, peroxided hair and trousers that had been shrunk to fit the perfectly agape cheeks of his buttocks. He catered directly to her and ignored Max.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes lingering on the waiter's body, "so much." He bowed and departed. Masha returned her attention to Max. "I'm sure," she repeated dreamily. "But, ah, you're a little older than I prefer."

She stirred her coffee.

"Sell me a name," he bartered.

No response.

"And I'll make Apollo and Dionysus part of the package."

"That hurts me, Max."

"Hey," he said quickly, charmingly, "the world's a shit-hole, ain't it?" He determined that it was what she wanted, what she expected to hear in the long run, anyway.

"Yes, Max. It is."

She gazed back with rheumy eyes, and something which had died within her long ago was blessed and buried once more. Her face sagged. Suddenly she looked very old, old and tired beyond all hope of redemption.

"Brian O'Blivion," she said tersely. "That is the only name I have to give. *Professor Brian O'Blivion.*"

The Cathode Ray Mission was located in the worst section of the city, which is to say in the cheapest rent district, a choice that befitted an institution devoted to serving the poor, the deprived, the walking mad, those who had nowhere else to hide themselves by day.

The Mission had taken over a run-down gray building dating from the fifties, when such featureless crackerbox constructions passed for modern and progressive. In other words, practical, cost-effective and utilitarian. Like a three-story pile of folded deck chairs, thought Max, as he parked the car and crossed the street to join the milling crowd.

The structure was identified clearly enough by incongruously clean stainless-steel letters mounted between the second and third stories, as well as by an appalling mock-religious insignia of the most extreme tattoo parlor variety: a passionate purple-and-red heart, complete with emphasis lines representing rays of light and surrounded by barbed wire. There was no dagger with the word MOTHER on the handle to

pierce the symbol, but there was a three-dimensional drawing of a fat cross engulfed in flames at the top.

Not such a bad logo for the unwashed masses, thought Max. In fact it had a certain vulgar appeal. A lot more striking than the Xerographic cels that his own Art Department had come up with for the station.

Now shuffling lines of downtrodden customers were queueing up at the main door. The Letraset sign at the top of the steps read OPEN FOR LUNCH 11:30 A.M.

I'm just in time, thought Max, and merged with the others.

The door opened and he inched his way forward past peeling handbills and grimy windows. In one pane of dark glass he caught up with a clouded image of himself. His overcoat appeared dirty, his sweater bagged and ratty. He glanced down at himself. It was more or less true. He hadn't sent anything to the cleaners in a long time.

Jesus Christ, he thought, I don't look that much different from any of these people. In fact, I'm getting to look more and more like them all the time. Sometimes I don't even remember to shave before I leave for the office. He touched his face self-consciously. The stubble was like #5 sandpaper.

I've got to get my act together. Of course, I've had a lot on my mind lately. But that's no excuse. It doesn't scan.

He felt eyes on him as he moved slowly forward. See? he thought. They know I'm not one of them. They can tell. He tossed away his cigarette and stuffed his hands into his pockets, hunching to avoid their disapproving stares. As he did so, a gang of men broke from the line and dove in a scuffle for the butt he had thrown to the sidewalk. They certainly had been watching him. He hustled to fill up the gap, which brought him to the entrance in record time.

The Mission itself was not what he expected.

Inside, walls had been torn out, turning the entire first floor into an enormous room that was nearly the length and breadth of a city block. It was like the waiting room of a train station, except for the partitions. Old hospital room dividers, plywood flats and the sides of oversized shipping crates had been erected to create hundreds of separate booths or cubicles. White-smocked attendants greeted the new arrivals and ushered them forward like patients to assigned examination areas. A rising babble of voices was magnified by the high ceiling. Somewhere a television set was playing. No, several television sets, all tuned to different channels.

Snap out of it, he told himself. Everything sounds like TV to you these days.

A stern young woman hovering somewhere between twenty and thirty moved among the aides and matrons, dispensing orders and making notes on a clipboard. She directed the staff with a nod of her head, a raised eyebrow and was instantly obeyed. That would be the daughter, Max realized, the one who oversees this place. She was as Bridey had described her. He crossed an aisle and approached her.

"This way, please."

A no-nonsense matron with shoulders broader than his own took him by the arm and walked him in the opposite direction. He started to explain. But she didn't want to hear it.

"We've had three Napoleon Bonapartes and five Jesus Christs already this morning," she said patronizingly. "Which one are you?"

Quite possibly he could have come up with an answer, but she didn't give him a chance.

He glimpsed the interior of one of the cubicles. In it a sunburnt old wino with matted hair and brown mittens was seated before a table, watching a bolted-down black-and-white television set of indeterminate manufacture. The controls of the set were taped to one position. The wino was watching a game show.

". . . And I'm sure our sponsors would say, 'So long for good to our little Japanese friends!' " an announcer with freeze-dried hair was saying. *"And so now . . ."*

The matron installed Max in the next cubicle.

"Sit down, please."

Max complied for the moment. It was interesting. He gave her his best smile. "Hi."

"Have you been here before?"

"No, I haven't. It's pretty neat."

The matron consulted a list. "We have two menus—soup and eggs or veg and eggs."

"I eat in here?"

"Yeah." She flicked her pencil. "Soup or veg?"

"Uh, soup."

"Fine."

Max patted the old plastic wood-grained set. "Can I get to watch Channel 83?"

The matron was mildly surprised. "You care what you watch?"

Max was about to give her his opinion, but she proceeded to the next cubicle.

He waited a decent interval, then ducked out and headed back the way he had come, searching for the tight hair and tortoise-shell

glasses of the young woman in charge.

He heard the clicking of heels beyond a fiberboard divider which had been decorated with crosshatch graffiti. HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS, someone had written there. Someone else had crossed that out and lettered, ROSES ARE RED/VIOLETS ARE BLUE/ I'M SCHIZOPHRENIC/AND SO AM I. Max peeked around the edge.

There. She was just now making her way to a roped-off stairwell. Max climbed it with his eyes. The second floor consisted of a mezzanine or gallery that ran around the perimeter of the building. That must be where the offices are, he thought. He slicked his hair behind his ears, straightened his sweater and overcoat as best he could and hurried to intercept her.

"Bianca O'Blivion?"

She stopped three steps up the stairs. "Yes?"

"I'm Max Renn. I run Civic TV. I was on a panel show with Professor O'Blivion. The Rena King Show."

She sized him up over the rims of her glasses.

"Oh, yes. You said some very superficial things. Violence, sex, imagination, catharsis . . ."

"My exact words."

She was unamused. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk with your father. About a new twist in video that he may not be aware of."

She allowed him to follow her.

He thought, it looks like I may have to get past his interference runner first. She's his Bridey.

"But I'm going to miss my soup," he tried, making friendly conversation.

"It's navy bean today," she said without a trace of irony. "I can have some sent up if you like."

"Maybe next time."

No, she's not like Bridey. As far as she's concerned this is Some Serious Business. Not a good sign. Well, it is that; but lighten up. You need pores if you want to stay human. He remembered the Professor's dry pontifications. She was her father's daughter, all right. A chip off the same microcircuitry.

The office was long and broad but remarkably unspacious.

It was too cluttered to invite much in the way of movement. In fact, though it was dense with artifacts—classical statuary, hand-tooled books, Persian rugs and even video equipment—the overall effect was that of a cloistered cell, such as might have been the habitat of some

eclectic, time-tripping monk.

The room was dim and muted by heavy drapes, highlighted at one end by candles. As he stood in the middle of it, drinking it all in, he found that his eyes needed more than a few seconds to adapt. He crossed to a window and parted the drapes.

Below the window was a view of the lower level of the mission. From overhead the maze of cubicles on the main floor reminded him of the interior chambers of a honeycomb or anthill, with each division containing a glowing video egg.

“I love the view,” he said.

“You look like them. Like one of Father’s derelicts.”

Like every other remark she made, this one was a coldly literal declarative statement. He turned from the window and let the drapery fall closed.

He said, “I think it’s a style that’s coming back.”

“In their case, Mr. Renn, it’s not a style. It’s a disease forced on them by their lack of access to the cathode ray tube.”

She assumed a commanding position behind the centerpiece of the room, a huge baroque desk decorated with carved serpentine bas-reliefs. In close proximity to the desk was a statue of a cherubic angel blowing a long horn-like affair, a trumpet of sorts. Gabriel, Max guessed.

“You think a few doses of TV are gonna help them?”

She indicated a heavy velvet-upholstered chair for him. “Watching TV will help patch them back into the world’s mixing board.”

“Absolutely,” he said, playing along. He tipped his head toward the video equipment. “And I guess you encourage Father’s derelicts to make home movies. For the world’s mixing board?”

He let his eyes roam past her to a somber stained-glass configuration behind the desk depicting a hand resting on the back of a throne, to a faded tapestry of a virgin and a unicorn, to an aged etching framed to resemble an image on a TV screen. Bianca moved easily among the collection, tending her father’s props with custodial efficiency. She lingered at a bronze bust. Before Max could identify the subject, she raised a swatch of cloth from the pedestal and cowled the sculpted features in shadow.

“Professor O’Blivion sends video letters all over the world. Mr. Renn, your secretary said something about a video club you wanted to join.”

“Is the Professor here?” he said impatiently.

“I am my father’s screen.” She returned to the desk.

Max sat uneasily on the edge of the red velvet chair.

“Once you’ve told me what this little visit is all about,” she continued, “he may choose to send you a cassette. If he does, which format would you like?”

“If he does, it’s going to make conversation a little difficult.”

She sat. She folded her hands and said patiently, “My father has not engaged in conversation for at least twenty years. The monologue is his preferred mode of discourse.” She took up pencil and pad. “Format?”

Max dropped all pretense. He said softly, without expression, “VIDEODROME.”

“Is that a Japanese configuration?”

“You’ve never heard of it?”

“No.”

She’s good, he thought. Too good. It’s going to take more than a password to break her.

It’s possible she doesn’t know. But the old man will. I’m not going to allow her to structure this meeting. She’s used to being the intermediary. But I’m not one of her messenger boys down there, her drones. I’m not going to be that for anyone. I gave that up a long time ago. Her father will want to hear what I have to say. I’ll get my audience. I’m going to deal directly with the source from now on.

He said, “Then there have been serious gaps in your education.” Before she could dismiss him he stood. “VIDEODROME. Mention it to your father. He may want to have a conversation.”

He passed the bronze bust, patted the cowling. He took one last look around the room. The votive candles guttered at his passing.

“I love the view,” he said.

He let himself out.

“Has it started?”

“You’re just in time, *patrón.*”

As Max watched, Harlan tampered with the receiver frequency. There was still no visual contact on the monitor, but the oscilloscope was blinking like a radar screen.

“Look at that thing track. It’s really trying to ditch us. Like one missile chasing another.”

Harlan reset his coordinates, one side of his face limned in green by the light from the ’scope. Max squeezed in next to him at the bench.

Two blips were playing a game of tag across the round tube. Harlan tuned to a finer calibration. Now the TV monitor came to life.

A single opening title faded in. It was jammed, shot through with

snow and static, but Max could make out a single word: VIDEODROME. It was enough. It was all there ever was.

“Do they know at the other end that they’re being chased?”

Harlan smiled approvingly. “Hey, that’s pretty good. Sure. If they’re monitoring their own track, they’ll know something’s after them. Otherwise the signal wouldn’t have to twist and turn so much.”

Max concentrated on the monitor as Harlan twirled a knob to another band.

“Huh?” said Harlan. “This is new . . .”

Suddenly the second blip vanished from the oscilloscope, and the title on the monitor sharpened to crystal-clarity. The murkiness lifted like a departing fog and the letters beamed in perfectly, as pure as a closed-circuit transmission. Max had never seen it so clear before.

“What? Looks quiet.”

“That’s just it,” said Harlan. “It *is* quiet. It’s letting us lock on. It’s not taking evasive action.”

On the monitor, the title faded out and the familiar electrified cellar faded in.

A woman. A new one. Of course. But this time something was different.

As she was dragged into camera range, struggling and screaming, every detail of her back and the concrete wall ahead of her registered with fine-grain acuity. Max could see each sweating indentation in the molded wall, the glistening tarnish of the wrist irons, even the individual strands of damp hair on her head. For once the picture was too hard-edged, like a hyperreal nightmare. The newly amplified reception made it seem less like a dream and more like a window on reality, separated from them now only by the invisible protective membrane of the picture tube . . .

Max felt his skin crawl.

But he could not tear his eyes away from the spectacle.

Harlan marveled at the effectiveness of his instruments. “Yeah,” he said, spinning across the frequencies. Nothing could spoil the reception even if he tried to detune it. “Steady as a rock. It’s like they’re beaming it straight into us.”

“Oh, God . . .” Max said.

The latest victim’s head was yanked up by the hair, slapped in close-up, again, again. The head lolled . . .

“What the fuck?” said Harlan. “That’s that lady shrink, isn’t it? Brand? Nicki Brand?”

Max could not move. His scalp shrank and he began to tremble. “Is

this still coming from Pittsburgh?" he managed through clenched teeth. He braced himself and fought to retain his balance. *"Is it?"*

"Yeah. Got to be."

Nicki's clothes were ripped from her body. And there. There were the small scars, the burns, the welts, the cuts—the heiroglyphics of her sessions with Max. He knew every mark by heart.

"Get out," he said, catching his breath. "C'mon. I don't want you to see this."

Harlan made a notation in his logbook. "Huh?" he said absently.

Max was shaking. The bench, the monitor, the instruments, the foundations of the entire electrified bunker in which he sat began to rattle as he gripped the slipperiest of edges for support.

"Get the fuck out!" he screamed. "Get out! *Now!"*

"Okay, Max, okay."

When Harlan didn't move fast enough, Max grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him off his stool.

"Shit, man!" Harlan broke violently free, snatched up his backpack and stomped to the door. "I don't need this. You know what's wrong with you, Max? You're too fuckin' weird!"

Part Three:

The Retina of the Mind's Eye

Chapter Seven

Harlan's voice: *"Torture, murder, mutilation."*

". . . VIDEODROME." That was Masha. *"What you see on that show is for real!"*

"I'm gonna audition," said Nicki. *"I was made for that show . . ."*

"It has something that you don't have, Max. It has . . . a philosophy! And that is what makes it dangerous . . ."

Max forced his eyes open.

The faces stopped weaving in and out of the granular darkness in front of him. Their voices, too. All except Nicki's. The interior of his apartment ceased swimming and found its level. She continued to writhe spastically under the lash which extended from the muscular arm of an unseen assailant. The wall behind her, the TV screen and the room in which he sat flowed with a color that was too deep to bear.

It was ten-thirty p.m.

And still Max could not leave the red room.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and groped with his other hand for the table lamp. He did not open his eyes again until it came on and diluted the intensity of the video image.

He could have shut off the tape. He could have done that hours ago.

But he was not yet finished with it.

Or was it not yet finished with him?

He had been sitting in one position too long. His kidneys ached, as if he had been pummeled into submission while asleep.

Had he been asleep? How could he be sure?

He held his eyes down and labored to regain control over his body, one muscle at a time. His belly itched. He must have been scratching it again. Damned nervous habit. He moved his hand to the collection of VIDEODROME cassettes on the table, tapped them idly. Next to them was the logbook. He opened the steno pad to the page marked "VIDEODROME TRANSMISSION PATTERN." But Harlan's scrawl remained impossible to decipher.

The screaming from the television set subsided to a whimper.

He got up abruptly and crossed the living room.

He was dizzy, feverish. He switched off the tape and leaned on the

set, sweating.

Something's wrong with me . . . I'm sick, he thought. Maybe it's the flu. I hope to God it's the flu.

What else could it be?

As he stood there supporting himself against the cabinet, the top of the set softened. Without warning it became sticky, gummy. It began to flow like gelatin.

His hand sank in. An inch, two inches—

Shocked, Max arched his body and pulled free.

He raised his shaking hand.

The palm was covered with blood.

No! he thought. This isn't happening. It can't be. It *didn't* happen. See? It didn't. No, no, no, no, no . . .

He forced his eyes back to the set.

There did appear to be a depression in the cabinet, between his home video game joysticks. As he watched, the palm-sized indentation in the simulated wood closed over like a wound healing in time-lapse photography, and was gone.

Check.

Compulsively he wiped his hand on his shirt. No trace of blood. Not a drop. Oh, you're tripping, Max, a flashback, a bad, bad one, that's all . . .

He reached out blindly and rapped his knuckles on the top of the set.

Hardwood. Well, wood-grained vinyl, at least.

But solid.

Still shaken, he left the living room and went instinctively to the closet, counting his heartbeats.

One, two, three, four, five . . . *still holding, sir. Not to worry.* One, two, three, four, five . . .

He ploughed through a mass of dusty clothing, stuff he hadn't worn in years but couldn't bring himself to throw out. He felt the edge of the shelf. His fingers closed around a soft, triangular case. For some reason the heft of it in his hand was reassuring.

He carried it into the kitchen, holding it tightly against his body, as though afraid that the blank, staring eye of the dead TV screen might see what he was up to.

He turned on the lights and went to the counter.

He handled the black leather case. In the lower right-hand corner was an inscription in gold lettering: FOR MAX, WHO CAN'T RESIST SHOOTING HIS MOUTH OFF. WITH LOVE FROM DEBORAH.

It was as he remembered it. That in itself was comforting.

He scratched his belly and opened the case.

There, nested in an oily rag, was the gun, an immaculate little Walther PPK automatic. He had never used it, but knowing over the years that it was there had been enough to make him feel more secure in some vague, undefined sense.

He had the feeling now that he might need it for the first time in his life, and soon, though for what purpose he could not say.

For protection, of course.

But against whom?

He examined the elements of the cleaning tools. Then he lifted the automatic from its compartment.

It hugged his hand as if it belonged there, as if it had already grown there, a part of him. Uncertainly at first but with growing confidence he cocked the hammer and checked the breech. The weapon's weight balanced superbly, pointing itself as effortlessly as a new appendage. He released the hammer gently, ejected the clip with unexpected ease, sorted through the case for oil and cartridges—

There was a knock on the front door.

One, two, three, four, five.

Very loud knocks, magnified in his ears as if by cement walls. But that was crazy. The walls of his apartment were not brick, they were —

Silence.

For a second he couldn't decide what to do.

Then he replaced the gun, covered the case frantically with a section of old newspaper and tiptoed out of the kitchen, past an astronomical poster of the moon and planets which adorned his refrigerator.

He wiped his hands on his trousers and undid the latch.

Carefully.

"Hi!"

He stepped back.

"This is your cassette, and this is something that came to the office for you from . . ."

He ignored Bridey's offering and got to the point. "What'd they say at CRAM?"

She swept past him into the living room. "They said that Nicki Brand is definitely not on assignment for them." Bridey removed the tape from his player and reached into her bag for a new cassette. "She had a month off coming to her and she decided to take it now."

When Max heard the VIDEODROME cassette pop up, he whirled and leaped across the carpet to stop her.

"Don't touch that!"

His fingers dug into her arm, spun her around.

Her face was deceptively innocent. He could almost believe she did not know what she was doing.

He slapped her across the mouth. A trickle of blood ran from her lip.

The impact splayed her hair to one side, masking her features. He noticed that there was a streak in the hair. He hadn't seen it before. When the hair fell back into place, he saw that it was not Bridey. *It was Nicki, Nicki!* How had she gotten in here?

He raised his hand, angled it like a knife and slapped her again, harder.

Her hair covered her face, then fell away. It was Bridey, after all.

Then he was simply standing there again, holding her by the arm.

She tossed her hair back from her forehead.

"Jesus, Max. You scared me. What the hell's wrong with you?"

He squinted at her until the strobing stopped.

"I dunno," he said, stunned. He scratched at his belly. "I—I think I'm gettin' a rash or somethin'."

Bridey played dumb. "What?"

He was ashamed by her limitless capacity for forgiveness. "Are you all right? Bridey, I'm s—I didn't mean to hit you." He released her arm, embarrassed. What could he say, do to explain?

"Hit me?" Her clear eyes searched his face solicitously. "You didn't hit me." She said it calmly, as if for her it hadn't happened, as if she hadn't noticed.

It was true. There was no blood on her mouth. She had had no chance to wipe it off. He had been watching.

He could trust his own eyes, couldn't he?

He could trust Bridey.

"No," he agreed quickly, "no, no! I know I didn't hit you. I . . ." He breathed heavily, fighting for control. He felt like a fool.

She stood close.

"You want me to stay here?" She started to touch his face.

He drew back. "Uh . . ."

"You look awful. Can I get you something?"

She really didn't know.

He thought of the gun in the kitchen. He tried to imagine what he

had been about to do with it. What he might do with it. Suddenly he was afraid. For Bridey.

"No, uh—no, I'm just, uh . . ."

His eyes roamed the familiar iconography of his living room, seeking something to settle on, a solid point of reference. All he could focus on was an old poster of the Apollo astronauts, a smaller photograph of the moon clipped to the center. Now it seemed to be a doorway to the uncharted regions of an alien landscape.

"Uh . . . I'm exhausted." He threw himself on her mercy. He affected a strained laugh. "I was in a deep sleep when you knocked. I—I guess I'm still not out of it."

She nodded sympathetically.

He led her to the door. "I'll remember to set the timer. Don't worry."

"If you're sure," she said uncertainly.

"I'm sure." He wanted her out of there. *Now.*

"Are you sure."

"Yeah. Thanks, Bridey. Tomorrow."

He opened the door for her.

She hung back, her brow troubled. "Max, that other cassette is from the office of Brian O'Blivion. I promised I'd hand-deliver it directly to you." She touched his cheek. "Will you call me if you need me?"

"Yeah."

He closed and locked the door after her. He leaned there. He made himself take deep, regular breaths. Until everything. Was. All right.

Now, then . . .

The cassettes she had brought. They were on top of the TV.

He lurched to the set. His belly still itched—what he had told Bridey was true. He was getting some kind of rash. But there was no time to worry about that now.

One cassette was his wake-up message, as she had said. He grabbed the other one, opened it—

And saw it move in his hand.

His eyes widened in horror as the black plastic softened and quivered on his palm. The take-up reel melted and sagged, its edges flowing into a new shape. It was breathing.

He dropped it.

This isn't happening!

It lay there on the carpet, inanimate object that it was.

See?

Oh, man, you must have tied one on last night . . .

He probed it with the toe of his shoe.

It was dead, all right. Okay? A piece of inert, injection-molded plastic loaded with ninety minutes of half-inch iron oxide videotape. That was all.

He snickered and shook his head, and stooped to pick it up.

The timer on his playback deck read 10:44 as he inserted the cassette. With no further hesitation he turned the set on and started the tape.

An image blipped on.

Standard color bars filled the screen from top to bottom. The bars jittered into alignment, then disappeared to be replaced by a medium-close shot of the Professor at his desk.

Max turned up the volume and sat.

It was the desk at the Cathode Ray Mission, no doubt about it. The stained glass, the tapestries . . .

O'Blivion shuffled papers, set them aside, folded his hands and looked up, addressing the camera.

"The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena. The VIDEODROME . . ."

The Professor moistened his lips and twitched the sensitive antennae of his moustache.

"The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye," he continued lecturing, though not discernibly from notes or cue cards. He was speaking his mind, and he was one with his words. *"Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore television is reality and reality is less than television."*

The way he put it, it sounded eminently logical. Or did it?

"Love comes in at the eye. The eye is the window of the soul. And VIDEODROME . . ."

He encircled his eyes with his fingers.

". . . is the ultimate spectacle."

Max laughed at this last pun.

The television O'Blivion raised his eyebrows, as if taking notice.

"Max . . . I'm so glad you came to me." His voice sounded tired now, more confidential. *"I've been through it all myself, you see."*

What is this? wondered Max.

How does he do it? How did he know I'd be sitting here . . . ?

But of course. The tape was intended for me, wasn't it? The pause,

the shift in tone—it was a calculated guess. A perfectly accurate one, as it turns out. He's a pro. Media Prophet, isn't that what they call him? It's a little spooky.

Max heard his own voice ask, "What's going on?"

"Well," said O'Blivion, *"you have a nice little addiction going. You have to be careful now."*

"Addiction?" said Max. "To what?"

"Why, to the VIDEODROME *signal, of course."* Perfect timing again. The ultimate in synchronicity. *"They got you to start watching, they seduced you, and now you're hooked."*

"But how does it work?" Max wondered aloud. "What does it do?"

"For those who have a natural propensity for its imagery, it's a kind of bio-electronic heroin. Your brain has already become an electron gun. Your retinae have become video screens. Your reality is already half video hallucination. If you're not careful, it will become total hallucination. You'll have to learn to live in a very strange new world . . ."

The television soundtrack jingled metallically.

"The brain tumor is undoubtedly forming," said O'Blivion, as a black-hooded figure dressed in chain mail entered the frame.

"I had a brain tumor, and I had visions . . ."

The hooded figure pinned one of O'Blivion's hands to the desk and clamped irons around the wrist. The Professor kept talking.

"I believed that the visions caused the tumor and not the reverse . . ."

His other hand was wrenched down and his wrists locked together.

"I could feel the visions coalesce and become flesh," he said, trying to get his message across while there was time, *"uncontrollable flesh . . ."*

The executioner slipped behind the chair and produced a garrote, looped its wire around O'Blivion's throat.

"But when they removed the tumor," he choked, his eyes fixed on the camera, on Max, *"it was called . . .* VIDEODROME*!"*

The wire tightened, cutting into O'Blivion's windpipe as it strangled him.

"I . . . I was . . . VIDEODROME*'s . . . first . . . victim!"*

O'Blivion succumbed and was dragged off his chair. Papers and pens scattered. His feet kicked in a death dance.

Max stood, swaying unsteadily.

"Who's behind it?" he asked earnestly, asked it or thought it, he didn't know which. As if he could still be heard. As if he could ever have been heard. But he had to know. "What do they want?"

The hooded figure stepped into frame again, coiling the wire. Then the figure leaned into camera, taking O'Blivion's place, and ripped off

the hood.

"I want you, Max. You."

It was Nicki Brand.

"Come to me . . ."

She advanced on the camera so that her face filled the entire nineteen-inch screen. She licked her lips.

"Come to Nicki . . ."

She began to twist her new earring, tugging at it just enough to hurt, enjoying the small pain.

"Come on . . . "

Her enlarged face pressed out into the room in extreme close-up, all wet teeth and red cupid's-bow lips. He heard the crackling lilt of her breathing in his ears as the speaker cone vibrated and stretched out to him, a living orifice.

Max approached the set as if in a dream.

He fell to his knees before her image.

"Don't make me wait . . . !"

As he grasped the breathing sides of the set, her larger-than-life lips distended to meet his forehead, the glass of the tube melting and ballooning outward to touch his skin.

He pressed his face into her face as the electron guns shot their images directly into his brain.

The set throbbed like an animal in heat.

Max's eyes closed. He no longer needed them to see. Nicki Brand fired through his eyelids as though they were no longer there, a mere technicality. He licked the screen, the soft screen, distorting the plastic face of Nicki Brand as he strained toward the possibility of acceptance and release in her, caressing her, sinking deeper into the pores and pulsing veins, the wet membranes of her flesh. The mouth widened in response. Her teeth opened, revealing the glistening sea of her tongue, the video scan lines growing wider, separating horizontally and opening to receive him between their strobing, deeper and deeper into the swelling red lips, until he was totally engulfed by the darkness in her throat.

"Come to me now. Please . . . oh, please . . . !"

Chapter Eight

"Where's Harlan?"

"Hi, Max! How are—?"

"Don't worry about me. Where is he? I called the lab but there's no answer."

"I haven't seen much of him. In fact, I haven't seen him at all. Max, you're wearing your shades again. That means you didn't sleep right after I left. I'm sorry. Why don't you let me put everything off till this afternoon? Go home, go back to bed, and I'll come over at lunchtime to—"

"I don't need to sleep anymore, Bridey. All I do is have bad dreams. You positive you haven't seen Harlan?"

"Um, he might be up in studio VTR. Did you check there?"

"I checked there."

Max spotted Moses's fringe of curly hair above the crowd in the hallway and decided on the opposite direction.

He turned back.

"One more question."

"Anything, boss."

"Has Harlan been hallucinating lately?"

Bridey flashed her dimples as though he had made a joke. "No, I don't think so. Should he be?"

"Yes," said Max. "He should be."

Max opened the padlocks and let himself into the lab.

The place smelled of oil and burned resin. As ever, nothing was in its place, if indeed there was a place for anything. On the main work surface an assortment of metric socket wrench fittings surrounded a skeletal chassis like silver mushrooms grown up overnight out of the dirty bench. It was all exactly as it had been when he last saw it. The lights were on.

Harlan could not have gone far.

Still, what if he did not show up?

Max sat down at the video recorder, whipped off his dark glasses and fished the steno notebook out of his coat pocket. He leafed it open

to the “VIDEODROME Transmission Pattern” page and propped it before him on the bench. The notes in Harlan’s scrawl remained all but indecipherable, as though set down in code to preclude Max’s direct access to the broadcasts without a technical go-between.

He did manage to deduce a general pattern to the transmission times, which varied from day to day. Max projected the approximate hour of the next broadcast and set the automatic timer, then pressed the RECORD/DELAY button. Then he pushed away from the bench to ease his back.

He ached all over. He would have to trust the timer; it was too long to wait.

But what if he was off in his calculations? And what if the signal resumed evasive action today and Harlan did not return in time to track it? Shouldn’t he stay just in case? But he wouldn’t know how to lock onto it. Besides, he couldn’t allow his entire day, his life to revolve around a pirate transmission, even if—

A voice behind him said, “Bridey told me you came in.”

It was not the voice of his engineer. This one was huskier, more of the nose.

Max had no time for it. He closed the notebook.

“What are you doing down here, Max? We’ve got a board meeting upstairs. You should be there to defend yourself.”

Max saw Moses’s elongated reflection in the dark glass of the monitor screen. The Executive Director rocked on his heels, hands nervously clinking coins in his pockets. His voice was flat, his tone guardedly confrontational. He did not attempt to come any closer. He had ventured onto someone else’s turf and knew it.

“Oh?” said Max, pocketing the steno book. “Am I under attack?”

“Damn right you are.” Moses was as humorless as at the most desultory of policy meetings. “I told Bridey to tell you we got trouble over this so-called lab—”

“She never told me anything of the kind. You aren’t even supposed to know about it.”

“—and what happens to you?” Moses rocked faster, savoring his point. “You don’t even show up at the deli for our off-the-record, let’s-save-our-asses meeting with Aubrey Reusch.”

Max expected him to say, *Now I’ve got you, you son of a bitch.* But what exactly have you caught me at, Mose? he thought. Insuring that our station stays on the air? How would *you* have done that? Right—there’s no answer to that one. That’s why I’m the President of Civic TV and you’re not. I’m the one who had the guts to let Harlan do whatever was necessary to keep us afloat. Would you have voted your

approval if I'd let you in on it? No. Of course not. And we'd all be peddling our programs on streetcorners by now. So back off.

Moses was waiting for an apology at best, at least an explanation. Well, there was no time for any of that now.

Max perused a stack of cassettes next to the recorder. They appeared to be dupes of the VIDEODROME transmissions. If so, they should not be left lying around. He closed his fingers around them.

Then he had a sinking realization, and righteous anger welled up inside him.

"What happened to Harlan? Did you fire him?"

"Max . . ." Moses turned sad, taking the part of noble victim. "Suddenly I don't know who I'm talking to. From what he tells me, *you* fired him. He's not here because of you."

I should have seen it coming, thought Max. Now I'm finally on my own.

Max wanted to get gone. But first he had to do something with the tapes. No telling what would happen to them now. There was a green plastic garbage bag hanging from a nail in the wall. He unhooked it and emptied it onto the floor. Paper towels, ends of wire, tissues, sandwich bags, yogurt containers, pencil shavings, lumps of solder like miniature splashes of cooled lava dumped out between the two men. Moses danced away from the detritus and pretended to be shocked. He played it to the limit. But his act was still kids' stuff, a bore.

"Okay, Moses. Out. I've gotta lock up." Max shook out the bag and dropped the tapes into it.

"You come upstairs with me and you talk to the boys."

The boys, thought Max. That's what they are. He bagged the last tape and sidestepped the refuse. He took Moses by the arm and hauled him to the exit.

"Not today, Moses. You handle it."

Max got him out, closed the door after them and set to refastening the three padlocks that he had left hanging from their steel loops.

Moses yanked his elbow.

"I'm your partner, Max. Don't you push me around."

Max shrugged him off and returned to the locks. He was having trouble; his hands were shaking.

Moses went for his elbow again.

Instinctively Max resisted. He felt the other's presence like a shadow behind him and imagined the locks clicking around his own wrists. It was not so far-fetched, was it?

He ducked, crouched and spun around, bringing his white-knuckled

fist up into Moses's chin.

The jaw and teeth snapped together like a clapboard.

Moses staggered back. His eyes bulged, uncomprehending.

Max recocked his fist and smashed him in the face again.

Only a part of his brain took it seriously this time. The rest of him watched it happening. It was interesting. So realistic. That was the power of the subjective point-of-view. I could always tell drug real from real real, but video real is something else, he thought, as the rays of light in the hall outside the lab contracted into video lines, creating an image of old Moses going down for the count. Max stepped over him, being careful to glance down. He did not want to miss the dramatic shift in perspective.

Moses looked up, his eyes strobing, and began crawling away toward a corner under the stairs.

It was getting pretty intense. Now there was blood, too. Max gave the image a parting kick in the side, in what he presumed was the general area representing the ribs, and closed his eyes to ring down the curtain on this episode.

When he opened them, Moses was cowering under the stairs but the video lines had dissipated.

The release of energy left Max more in control of himself. He succeeded in fastening the last of the locks and made ready to leave.

"You fucking maniac!" Moses screamed at the top of his lungs. "You asshole! You hit me! You hit me!"

Max hesitated.

Now this was certainly a new wrinkle in characterization. From pompous corporate executive to hysterical, groveling toady. Complete with smashed glasses and bloody nose. Was this projection the way he had always seen Moses subconsciously? It had to be. It was a creation of his own mind and no one else's, wasn't it?

Max sloughed the bag over his shoulder like a slightly fried Santa Claus and said benignly, "I didn't hit you, Moses." He was on his way up the stairs as the image of his partner continued crawling away to escape his terrible wrath. The tableau did not displease Max. It had a certain flavor of truth about it; in some respects it was right as rain. "Don't lie to me," he said. "I didn't hit you."

His spirits lifted by the showdown, he let himself out the back door and followed the alley to his car.

He considered it a demonstration of his competency, proof of his ability to cope with the growing subreality of an intruding inscape. He could function effectively when required to do so. And, with any luck, gain from the experience and pass his wisdom on to others. The

audience of Civic TV, his audience, could not in their wildest drug-induced fantasies imagine what was in store for them under his tutelage. Television fit for the eighties.

By the time he got to the Cathode Ray Mission, he began to see his problem as a kind of test.

". . . As our players attempt to cross this bridge . . . and win a prize package worth five thousand dollars!"

Max's attention was captured briefly by the effusions of a game show announcer. He located the voice. It was coming from a cubicle close to the stairs. Through an opening in one of the partitions, he saw a compressed black-and-white image worming on the picture tube of a taped-together TV set.

On the screen what appeared to be three oversized playing cards—a king, a queen and a jack—cavorted for the amusement of an unseen audience, as well as for a saucer-eyed bum in a misshapen overcoat and lumpy sweater who sat transfixed in his own viewing area. Momentarily diverted, Max's eyes followed the antics of the red queen. But before he could see what she was up to, his visual access was blocked as a matron entered the cubicle and set a sweating glass of orange juice before the bum.

Max was jarred by the interruption. He blinked, remembering where he was and what he was here for, and repositioned himself on the staircase so that he could oversee as much as possible of the first floor.

The matron with her tray progressed along the aisle between the partitions, pausing to exchange words with a tall young woman in a black turtleneck sweater and white smock. The tall woman issued further instructions and, at last, veered off in the direction of the stairs.

Max rose to intercept her.

She did not glance up from her clipboard.

"Exciting," said Max. He held out the cassette she had sent him. "Very lively."

Bianca O'Blivion finally acknowledged him. Almost fearfully she took back the cassette and slipped it into her pocket.

"Careful. It bites," he said.

He ascended the stairs with her. Though she kept her eyes straight ahead, he felt her disapproval. He adjusted the cuffs of his clean shirt.

"I dressed up," he said, "and nobody noticed. That's not very supportive."

Bianca gave him only a cursory glance. "You're looking very . . .

brisk today." The word seemed to give her some trouble. Her lips hardly moved.

Once again he gave up trying to win any points with her.

As they entered the privacy of the office, she turned to him with her full attention at last.

"So you've watched the cassette."

"Yeah."

"And?"

"It changed my life," said Max sarcastically.

Bianca paced.

"I'm not surprised," she said softly, not unsympathetically. "It's dangerous, you know."

Max pressed the topic. "Because your father admits he's somehow involved with VIDEODROME?"

"More than that. It bites. Isn't that what you said?" She assessed him, her penetrating eyes locking on him from behind her large glasses. "What kind of teeth do you think it has?"

Now he felt nailed to the floor, pinned in place for her detached, scientific observation. Like one of her subjects, patients, whatever they were, down below.

"Why don't you tell me?" he suggested.

"You look very uncomfortable, Mr. Renn. You have the demeanor of a man who is hallucinating. Are you?"

"Is it obvious?"

"To me it is. Just like my father. Before the brain operation."

"Oh, really? Just what was it that was wrong with him?"

"He'll tell you all about it himself. But for now, I'm interested in your reaction to the tape. Father would be, too."

"It triggered off a series of hallucinations, yes," Max admitted. He massaged his temple. "Uh, I woke up with a headache."

Bianca's gaze probed deeper. "The first time ever?"

What did she want from him? At this point he had no choice but to play it her way. She—and her father—were holding most of the cards. He had come here for answers and it was clear that no information was going to be offered up gratis. He had to do it Mission-style. For the time being.

"No," he said, "I've been hallucinating for a while." So don't give yourself too much credit, he thought. "Ever since . . ."

"What?"

She was using a clinical, non-directive approach to press him to it,

to a realization that would not mean anything to him unless he arrived at it on his own, a prearranged epiphany, as it were, but an authentic revelation nonetheless.

"Since I first saw VIDEODROME," he said.

Suddenly he wanted to sit down.

He waited for her to begin making notes on her clipboard.

"How did you come to be exposed to it?" she inquired neutrally, gathering data, keeping her distance.

"Pirate satellite dish," he confessed. "A—an accident. I made some tapes."

Bianca removed the Professor's tape, the one Max had just returned, from her pocket and held it up like a specimen. "This is part of my own VIDEODROME collection."

"But that tape was just your father sitting at his desk." Was she deliberately trying to confuse him?

"The tone of the hallucination is determined by the tone of the tape's imagery. But the VIDEODROME signal, the one that does the damage—it can be delivered under a test pattern, anything."

"Damage?"

"Brain damage. The signal induces a brain tumor in the viewer. It's the tumor that creates the hallucinations."

A familiar theory. Only this time, hearing it from a second party, did the full weight of it sink in. Max's blood pressure surged.

"And you let me watch it?"

"I expect them to come to me eventually. To hurt me." The rigid, affected cadence of her voice faltered for the first time. "I thought it might be you. I thought you had taken the trouble to disguise yourself the first time you came here." She drew a broken breath, filling her lungs and standing straighter than ever. "But now I realize you're just another victim. Like Father was."

She looked and sounded surprisingly fragile. Max controlled the instantaneous sympathy he felt for her now, held it in check for the moment along with the rage. "Where is your father? I—I think I'd better talk to him."

Bianca placed a hand on the wall near the desk and pushed. Cracks of darkness, then light showed through in the shape of a vertical rectangle. A door.

So that was how the executioner got into the room, thought Max. On the tape. No, not an executioner—Nicki. But of course it had not really been Nicki. It had not really been anyone. Obviously not, if the Professor was waiting even now on the other side.

Bianca stood aside to allow Max to enter first. “He’s in there.”

The time to hesitate was through. He brushed past her and ducked under a piece of modern sculpture hanging from the wall. It was a stylized rendering of a human figure suspended in midair. Max recognized it in passing as a representation of a crucified man without the benefit of a cross for support.

“I’m afraid he’ll disappoint you,” said Bianca.

Max opened the door.

The light from the office extended unevenly onto the concrete floor beyond. He passed through a wide green door into a large, spartan room of rigorously pragmatic design. The concrete was softened by a few throw rugs here and there, but row upon row of floor-to-ceiling metal shelves suggested nothing so much as a medical or scientific library. The gray military paint added to the functional, high-tech effect.

Max came to the first shelf. It was packed not with books but with videocassettes, filed by date and subject. He examined the spine of one. *The Influence of Cinematic Techniques on Dreams and Visions—Feb. 16, 1972.*

Bianca joined him as he read the label.

“This is it,” she said. “This is all that’s left.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Brian O’Blivion died quietly on an operating table eleven months ago.”

He did not have the time or energy to challenge her. He accepted it at face value. She wasn’t lying, he was sure of it. She was too literal-minded a person to deceive directly. To mislead by omission, perhaps; but not to lie.

“The brain problem?” he asked.

“The VIDEODROME problem.” She considered him with what he took to be genuine regret. “You have it, too.”

“But he was on that panel show with me.”

“On tape. He made thousands of them, sometimes three or four a day. I keep him alive as best I can. He had so much to offer.”

Max was nonplused by the disparity between the distant, faintly melancholy expression etched onto her face and the body language of her brave, unswerving stance. She was a courageous young woman, and she was pulling it off. But the tension left its mark around her eyes and mouth.

“My father helped to create VIDEODROME. He saw it as the next phase in the evolution of man as a technological animal. When he realized what his partners were going to use it for, he tried to take it away

from them. But they killed him. Quietly. At the end, he was convinced that public life on television was more real than private life in the flesh. He wasn't afraid to let his body die."

Max forced himself to breathe in, out, remaining calm. The air between them became grainy with dust as she moved between the stacks, removing one, two, three, four tapes from their ordained places. Beams of sunlight filtered down at the end of the row, through crosses outlined in the stained glass of the high arched windows which disclosed the room's true nature.

"Tell me about my VIDEODROME problem," he said.

She held the tapes out to him and bowed her head.

"My father knows much more about it than I do. Listen to him."

Chapter Nine

". . . I am my own brain surgeon. I shape my own environment, and thus my own perception of reality, and thus I operate my own nervous system. There is a sense, then, in which I am responsible for my own brain tumor. Did I not willingly expose myself to VIDEODROME*? I did. The brain surgeon at work. But in this case I am more like a plastic surgeon because I am adding as well as taking away. Well, let me add more . . ."*

Max could not get comfortable on his sofa.

O'Blivion was seated calmly at his desk, or so anyone would adjudge, hands folded solemnly as he delivered his monologue. But Max was finding it increasingly more difficult simply to sit and listen. He scratched his belly absently with growing discomfort.

The air was stale in his apartment. It made him nauseous. Or *something* was making him nauseous. His stomach wouldn't settle down. Had he forgotten to eat? Probably. But the idea of food made him even sicker. He needed nourishment, but that which could be taken in by mouth just didn't cut it anymore.

He lowered the volume of the TV.

He needed for something to happen. He needed to *do* something about his predicament. He needed actions. Words were after all only words; there was a definite limit to how far abstractions alone could take him.

He thought: We use words to try to come to terms with things for which there are no words. But one day, if we manage to get beyond symbols, maybe we won't need words at all. Feelings that are thoughts, thoughts that become deeds. The living word. That's all that really counts when the chips are down.

Or so it seemed to him.

Nothing was clear anymore.

He stopped the tape on the latest of O'Blivion's lectures. The Professor was developing his thesis with convoluted, self-reflexive logic. Probably well worth my time, Max thought. What else have I got going? I'll have a lot better handle on what's happening once I've absorbed it all and made it a part of me.

Only not now. Not just now, okay? You know what I mean? I've got one mean itch, it won't let up, and all the words in the world aren't going to help me get rid of it.

He was sweating and trembling like a malaria sufferer. The rug felt thick and bumpy under his feet. It took him a ludicrously long time to get across the room.

He wondered if the motor centers were the first to go in such cases. VIDEODROME cases, if there was even such a thing. VD for short.

Reconsider the possibilities.

The old Professor might be pulling your leg, did you ever think of that? O'Blivion could be sitting in his office right now having the time of his life making these tapes for you, Max old boy. The perfect hoax. In the beginning you thought it might be a phonied-up head-trip, didn't you? And his daughter is in on it, naturally. And Nicki Brand. Say these aren't videotapes at all that you're seeing; you're getting a direct feed from the second floor of the Cathode Ray Mission. Plus they've got the apartment wired for two-way sound. And someone, probably Nicki, slipped you some kind of powerful timed-release mind-altering drug of the psychedelic persuasion so that your senses would exaggerate it all out of proportion.

Or, banality of banalities, you've been imagining or dreaming the whole thing in your—in my—own mind. At any rate harmless enough, so far. Have there been any really serious or significant consequences? No. Except for missing a lot of time at the station, nothing. Channel 83 is still broadcasting. The business hasn't gone to hell. It was already halfway there, but Harlan and Raphe and Bridey and the others will hold it together just fine. Until I get back and straighten things out again.

My absence might even prove to be a blessing in disguise. For all I know our ratings may have doubled in the last few days. I wonder . . . ?

And so on and on in a similar vein.

Words, he thought. So many words. To what avail? I still hurt like one sorry son of a bitch and no words are going to change that.

And, so thinking, he picked up his gun, slung the holster over his shoulder and shuffled to the bathroom.

He had a numbing, mind-splitting headache, as if there were a small revolution going on inside his skull.

If that was true, then one thing was abundantly clear: he was losing.

Max drew a tub of water and fired up the old hydromassage which was clamped to the side at a crazy angle like a vintage outboard motor. The machine clanked away, feebly stirring the water into a pathetic semblance of a whirlpool.

He stripped and watched the rising currents churn and eddy, the waters turning opaque, a crystal ball within the depths of which a

misty portent might be about to assume form and shape. He stooped and regulated the speed of the mechanism. In the center of the tub the water swelled like expanding gelatin, mounding and hissing with aeration. He steered clear of it, shuddering.

You're okay, he told himself, see? Really, now.

He faced the mirror over the sink for confirmation. But the small room was rapidly filling with steam. As he stared into it, the glass frosted over and the reversed image of his own face and body smeared into a formless cloud and disappeared.

The hell with it, he thought. I'm all right, you're all right, we're all all right. Just give us a few minutes here to unwind, to sink down into the soothing waters and be cleansed and revived. Nothing like a good soak to smooth things out. When you get out of here you'll feel like you've been born all over . . .

He tested the water with one toe. The claw feet of the tub creaked into the boards and seemed to curl under, gripping the floor as the sweating cast iron legs buckled under his weight. The air cleared momentarily and he recognized that it was only an optical illusion. He lowered his other foot and eased down, removing the holstered gun only at the last moment and laying it carefully on the end table next to the tub.

He sat.

God, it felt good. He let the hump of aeration buoy his legs so that the lower half of his body was nearly weightless. Steam collected in his eyebrows and lashes, clotting his vision. Fine. He had seen enough recently to last him for a long while.

He rested his head on the back of the tub, dunked a washcloth, squeezed it out and plastered it over his face to blot out the light.

The porcelain sides warmed under his arms, his legs rose in suspension, his head tipped back and he floated free. The physical reality of his body receded until it no longer mattered. He breathed evenly through the moist heat of the washcloth and permitted the white sound of respiration in his ears to blend with the hissing of the waters which supported him. The warm light showing through the membranes of his eyelids melted into darkness and he descended by degrees of sensory deprivation into a state of non-being that was like the suspended animation provided in utero. The material world no longer mattered to him. He gave up his tenuous contact with it until it ceased to exist.

There was only the fizzing of the whirlpool to keep him awake. Nothing else.

He sank deeper until the water level covered his ears.

A stream of tiny bubbles broke free from his back and tingled up his spine.

He relaxed his muscles and waited for the tickling sensation to stop. It did, and once more he was undistracted.

Except for the itch.

He submerged one hand and pumped bathwater against his irritated abdomen. But the itching did not go away. In fact it got worse.

There was no such thing as merciful oblivion in this life, after all. Not while one lived and breathed and remained bound to the corporeal. It was a useless delusion which had not even lasted a minute. There was always a wild hair, some discomfort; even in the mothproof closet would always be found a moth. There was no getting away from it. The spirit might be willing to leave all this excess baggage behind, but the flesh, as long as it lived, would be weak. The philosopher-theologians were right about that part of it.

He sighed and dragged the cloth from his face to see what it was he was scratching.

Through the glistening milkiness of the water, he detected an angry red line on his stomach.

He sat up.

The skin was raw and inflamed where he had scratched it. As the water slid away, the line of irritation revealed itself to be a swollen welt, a vertical ridge of red skin extending upward six or seven inches from his navel.

Max bent forward for a closer look.

The water lapped over his belly. In its swirls he seemed to see the reflections of stretched anthropomorphic figures, liquid wraiths of light and darkness caught in their transformations as if by the lens of a circular mirror.

He glanced up quickly.

There was only the mist collecting in the closed room, lifting like smoke to the cracked ceiling and coiling back down the narrow walls.

The pressure in the room was building; he felt it throb dully against his eardrums like a drum beaten underwater.

The bar of soap on the table was soft, spongy; it appeared to be melting into the dish which rested on the warped veneer. He blinked wetly. The layers of wood split apart and separated, ungluing in the humidity. The leather holster creaked.

The rash on his stomach itched worse than ever.

He splashed water over it and smoothed it with his hand, and blinked again.

The fiery line intensified until the mark on his body raised in a long weal. The water ran off, leaving the line puckered. It resembled a seam.

His hands were puckered, too, his fingers wrinkled as prunes. That was all it was. Nothing unusual. A rash, the texture of his skin shrinking in the bath.

He looked away, and blinked again.

The air was grainy with steam.

Shapes congealed out of the mist, as if the door to his bathroom had swung soundlessly open on the outlines of dark figures emerging from the other side. The stippled air solidified into gray bands, horizontal lines which began to roll in phosphorescent heat mirages . . .

The mound of aeration in the center of the tub grew larger, more convex, as air bubbles in the shape of something white and decayed gathered and pushed at the surface.

He pushed himself up and stepped hurriedly out of the tub, and reached for his pistol.

The automatic was slippery with condensation but the weight of it was reassuring in his hand. He held it out from him and, using the short barrel, nudged the door open.

The steam began at once to dissipate into the hallway. The mirror cleared.

He bellied up to the sink and examined the reflection of his body. The skin of his abdomen was only slightly reddish, undoubtedly from his own persistent scratching. He stroked the skin. Almost nothing—no inflamed, puckered seam, no raised welt. As he watched, most of the redness faded.

Nerves, he thought. Keep your hands to yourself, Maxie. Quit playing around.

He felt better.

Just wait till you get your head together again. Till then, no more VD. Listen to everything O'Blivion and the rest of them have to say, until you know enough to beat them at their own game. Pretty soon the conditioning, the drugs, whatever it was will wear off and they won't be able to get to you. You'll see. Just wait.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and padded back to the living room.

But he took the holster and gun with him.

The Professor's tape resumed where it had left off.

". . . I believe that the growth in my head—this one, right here—I think .

. . *I* think *that it is not really a tumor, not an uncontrolled, undirected little bubbling pot of flesh, but in fact is a new organ, a new part of the brain. I think that massive doses of the* VIDEODROME *signal will ultimately create a new part of the human brain which will produce and control hallucination to the point that it will change human reality. After all, there is nothing real outside our perception of reality, is there?"*

O'Blivion laughed grimly.

"You can see that, can't you?"

Max didn't know what he could see anymore.

He only knew that his head was hurting again. It always started right behind the eyes. It could be that the problem was not only VIDEODROME. It could be video, period.

He thumbed the remote control and reduced the volume. His ears were ringing; he wasn't sure what he was hearing. At this point it all ran together. The Professor mouthed on at his desk. Max touched another button and froze the tape on a single frame. The Professor's hands remained locked rock-firm on the desk, his mouth opened quizzically on a tunnel of darkness.

Max slouched on the sofa. He felt listless, bone-weary. That was what the bath had done for him. Too much of a good thing was worse than no help at all. His muscles were rubber. The damp towel was still wrapped around him; it held him to the cushions like adhesive. It would require the greatest effort of will to move from this spot, to change tapes, for instance, or to get himself something to eat . . .

He *was* hungry, by God, physically hungry at last. He ran through a mental list of what he had left in the kitchen. Not much. Nothing there that he needed.

He wondered what he did need.

Without realizing what he was doing, he scratched himself with the stubby barrel of the gun. His stomach was itching again.

He felt the gunsight catch on something. An unnatural fold of skin, probably, created by his nearly supine position. He blinked and glanced down sleepily.

The seam running up his belly was back.

Only this time the raised line was puckered up into a protuberant ridge. Two parallel ridges, to be precise.

As he watched, the twin halves of the seam engorged and separated like dry mucous membrane, pulling apart to reveal a livid interior.

Max moaned, shook his head. *No, no, no, no, no* . . .

He stretched his eyelids fully open and moved his head on his shoulders to take in the rest of the room, to regain perspective.

There were the familiar appurtenances of his life, each piece of

furniture located exactly where he expected it to be, the reassuring disorder of his possessions, the videocassettes scattered like leaves at his feet, the half-empty cup of cappucino balanced on the arm of the sofa, the floating milk on top streaked and scummy, Professor O'Blivion's face frozen in an anticipatory expression, mouth open in amazement. All was as it had been. The edges of every object were outlined hard and clear with no veil of granularity to confuse him, no video lines twitching before his eyes . . .

His stomach convulsed.

He looked down.

It was still there.

Now the sides of the seam opened and closed, lips alive with their own rippling rhythm.

His breath came quick and shallow.

The slit opened wider and he saw deep red folds within, wet and hungry, pulsating like an ever-widening mouth.

He clenched his teeth and forced his lungs to breathe in, out, as deeply and regularly as possible. His spine stiffened and he pressed his back into the cushions. But he could not escape. It was here.

What he saw was happening to his own body and there was no way to get away from it.

Shaking, he probed it with the barrel of the gun.

The slit expanded wider, two, three inches across. Now the opening extended halfway up his chest. Layers of blood-filled tissues were clearly visible within, throbbing wetly. Then, like an anemone which has been disturbed, the incision contracted, the edges folding inward on the wound.

He probed deeper, more forcefully, his chin pressed to his chest in horror.

There was no pain, but the tissues did not respond.

He pushed more firmly.

The flesh opened again and gave way under the pressure, and the full length of the gun was suddenly sucked into his body, including his hand up to the wrist.

He threw his head back and bit off a scream.

He pulled, pulled again harder.

The seam closed like a toothless mouth around his wrist.

He lurched to his feet.

"No," he said aloud. "No. C'mon, now. No no no no no . . ."

His breath came in spasms, his chest heaving for air. He staggered desperately around the room, careening between table, lamp, TV set .

. .

"Professor O'Blivion," he choked. "What is—?"

Without warning his hand slipped back out of his stomach, disgorged.

The hand was covered with a red, gelatinous substance, bits of flesh and muscle clinging to it.

The gun was no longer there.

He looked down at his belly.

There was only a faint red line, the rash that he had been scratching.

He touched it.

Normal skin. Nothing more.

His eyes darted wildly around the room.

He searched every surface, the top of the TV, the table, the sofa . . . nothing. It was impossible. The gun couldn't be in his body. *It could not.*

I will not have this! he thought.

He tore at the cushions. Jammed back into the corner of the sofa was the holster.

The empty holster.

He pressed his hands to his abdomen. It did seem swollen. Or did it? He flattened his hands against his stomach and pressed. Could there be a lump, a shape . . . ?

No. Nothing.

"Professor O'Blivion," he said intensely, "what is going on? Really, now? You can't be serious. This isn't . . ."

The face on the screen, held suspended in a single freeze-frame, began to lose its clarity. The color desaturated as the image destabilized, broke up into distortion and finally washed out completely. The last thing Max saw was the darkness in the mouth spreading out of an open throat to fill the screen, diffusing widely to dim the living room, and then nothing.

The phone rang shrilly.

Max broke down and laughed. What was happening to him was too insane. It was—

The phone rang again, again.

He found it and lifted the receiver.

A distant voice said, "Max?"

"Yeah." He waited. Static on the line. "Who is this?"

"Why don't you take a look and see?" A woman's voice.

"Look where?"

"Where do you always look to find out what's really happening?"

A pink light flickered in the room.

He shot a glance at the console TV set. A picture was taking shape. He saw his own reflection in the picture tube glass, naked now before the set, the hair on his head drying in spikes like energy lines. Then his image was blotted out by the face of a woman. She was holding a telephone receiver. Her lips moved.

"It's Nicki," said the voice on the phone.

"Fuck!"

"I sent you a video love letter. Did you get it?"

"Bitch! I thought you were dead."

"Dead?" Nicki laughed through her nose. "I wouldn't die without letting you in on it. Didn't you know that? Besides, nobody really dies on VIDEODROME. But I couldn't resist, lover. I knew you'd be watching."

Max held to the phone, swaying. He met her eyes dead on. "I watched it a lot. Over and over."

"Oh no, Max. That's not good. That's . . . it's very complicated, lover. It's not what you think. It's not what anybody has ever thought before. But I know what's happening to you. Come to me. Come to Nicki."

He weighed his options. He did not exactly have an unlimited slate to choose from. And he had to know. He had to regain control. Somehow.

"Night flight to Pittsburgh?" he said.

Nicki laughed again onscreen and repositioned her head as though to see him, his face, his body. "I'm right downstairs, waiting for you." Her lush, cupid's-bow lips parted enticingly, her red tongue thick and lubricated. "I wanna take you for a ride. Come to Nicki now."

She winked and hung up.

The receiver went dead in his hand.

The screen blanked out, then brightened again with an extreme close-up of O'Blivion, no longer at his desk but now floating in a kind of two-dimensional electronic limbo. His voice came from the TV set's speaker grille.

"I think you should do it, Max. I think you should go. When they reached the point where physics became philosophy, they asked me to help them. Now they've reached the point where philosophy becomes flesh—and they need you. *It's a good position to be in. Take advantage of it."*

Part Four:

The Ultimate Spectacle

Chapter Ten

Max tossed down a few ounces of his best Scotch. It burned his insides but it warmed him. It wasn’t enough, however. He felt a chill spreading from his toes and fingertips, up his arms and legs, closing in on his heart.

He dressed in his bulkiest clothes and heaviest overcoat and made for the stairs.

The lobby of his apartment building was cold and empty as a mausoleum. The inner workings of his body, his own breathing and the labored pumping of blood through his veins reverberated in his ears. He balanced at the foot of the stairway, one hand on the railing for support, not knowing what to expect.

On the other side of the heavy glass doors the night was punctuated by the lights of the city and of a great dark ship anchored offshore, waiting. The faint lanterns on its bridge winked at him like impatient insect eyes, beckoning.

He moved forward, dragging his feet slowly over the tiles, as though underwater.

The street was deserted. Except for a few parked cars bunched near the end of the long block the area was lifeless at this hour, a forgotten movie set from a backlot ghost town.

He squinted up and down the block. Only a scrap of newspaper in the shape of a crushed dwarf blew toward him along the pavement, frog-marching between the shadows of battered trash cans. He lit a cigarette and pitched the sizzling match into the gutter. A cold breeze blew around the corner and numbed his face.

He retreated to a spot under the eaves of his building to get his bearings.

In the distance a long, dark car crossed an intersection and purred toward him with its lights off.

He doused his cigarette and started off in the opposite direction.

The long car glided up to the curb next to him. It was a stretched silver-and-black Lincoln limousine. The windows were tinted so Max could not see who, if anyone, was at the wheel. He flipped up his collar and kept walking.

The limo started up again. It paced him for a few yards, then accelerated ahead and braked about a hundred feet up the block.

Max made a decision. And his fear left him like a physical presence lifting and flapping away overhead. He unclenched his fists in his pockets.

He ambled on until he was even with the vehicle, veered to the curb without looking up, opened the giant wing of the car door as easily as if it were something he did at least twice a week, and got into the back seat.

He sank heavily into the leather upholstery.

The driver was all but invisible beyond the smoked glass partition separating the passengers' compartment from the driver's seat. The man at the wheel could have been anyone, or no one. The bill of the chauffeur's cap cast an impenetrable shadow across the face.

Max heard a dull thud as the door locked automatically. Then the chirp of thick tires as the driver sped away from the curb. For a few seconds Max heard nothing else. The soundproofing was obviously very effective. The car was as silent as a padded coffin. The interior was ridiculously plush. He noticed a wireless telephone. It was not the style Nicki had used a few minutes ago, on his TV.

Then there was a crackling and a metallic voice said, "Good evening, sir."

Max could not see the driver's lips move, if indeed he had lips.

"You'll find newspapers and magazines under the folding seats," said the voice, "as well as food, coffee and soft drinks in the cabinet. Welcome aboard."

"You mean there's no television set?"

"Yes, sir. I was just getting to that. If you'll please direct your attention to the walnut-veneer panel in front of you, Mr. Renn. My employer, Mr. Convex, has recorded a little introductory speech for you."

Another name out of left field to contend with, thought Max. Nice. I guess.

He released the catch. The panel slid aside to uncover a small ten or twelve-inch monitor screen. It was already on.

It was watching him. A yellow-and-green graphic of a human eye glowed in close-up, overlaid with the words: *SPECTACULAR OPTICAL —Keeping an Eye on the World.*

The logo dissolved through to a medium-close shot of a crisp salesman-type against a plain, undistracting background. The fellow seemed to be smiling directly at Max.

"Hi! I'm Barry Convex, Chief of Special Programs, and I'd like to invite you into the world of Spectacular Optical—an enthusiastic global corporate citizen. We make inexpensive glasses for the Third World, and missile

guidance systems for NATO."

He beamed into the camera, his high brow polished and gleaming under a blown-dry fringe of brown hair tastefully arranged over his tanned forehead. His voice dropped confidentially.

"We also make VIDEODROME, *Max, and as I'm sure you know, when it's ready for the marketplace, well, it will have quite an impact, to say the least. It can be a giant hallucination machine and much, much more. But it's not ready. Those were test transmissions you picked up. We thought nobody could tap into them . . ."*

"Nobody except the pirates," said Max.

Barry hoisted his shoulders and said casually, *"Well, now that you have, I think we ought to have a little talk, don't you?"*

"Pittsburgh?" asked Max without enthusiasm.

"I thought maybe . . . my place?"

The TV set did not wait for an answer. It held Barry Convex's slick con man's visage a moment longer, then blipped off.

The car surged onto a motorway. Max was thrown back into the seat, which enfolded him like a gloved hand. Outside the tinted windows a swarm of night lights streaked past.

I need a drink, thought Max. At least that.

He discovered the bar and poured himself a double Scotch. It was MacAllan single malt, vintage 1964. The best.

"Oh God, Max," said an all-too-familiar voice. *"I'm so excited to see you!"*

Max choked on his drink and came close to biting through the lip of the glass.

The TV set was active again. The dim light from the screen threw a pink glaze over the sumptuous interior as the woman's face leaned into the camera, then pulled away to give him a full view of herself.

"Yeah," he said. "Don't tell me. They saw your potential and made you an executive."

She was not wearing what she had worn on his TV. She was dressed conservatively, functionally, but with a twist of something that suggested rationality taken to the degree of perversion. In fact, she was dressed like a black Saab automobile.

"No," she said. *"This is all for you. They want to meet you. Wanna drink?"*

"I'm working on it. By the way, I appreciate the TV."

"Mm, so do I. We've got The Max and Nicki Show *right here."*

"And we're taking it on the road. But where to? You didn't ask me to bring my toothbrush."

"It's not far. When I told them about you—who you were and how you happened to see VIDEODROME*—they went crazy."*

"He's good, that Harlan. A good pirate."

"What are they like, Max, the hallucinations? Are they weird and incredible and sick and wonderful?" She was touching herself and salivating.

"Then you do know what's been happening to me."

"That's been the whole point. That's what VIDEODROME *really is. You watch it and you get stoned. When it's officially introduced, the world will never be the same again."*

"What about me? Will I ever be the same again?"

Nicki said thoughtfully, *"I don't know. I don't think* they *know. Suddenly you're their star subject. It doesn't work on everyone. It didn't work on me. I wish it had."*

"Do you?" said Max conversationally, draining the last of his drink through his teeth, as if he and Nicki had been having conversations like this for the past twenty years. He tried mightily to take it all in the proper spirit.

"I don't like it here, honey." Nicki's broad face fisted with displeasure. *" 'The world as we know it'—the commonly-agreed-upon reality. Who needs it? I think I'd like it where you are a whole lot better."*

He was beginning to register the effects of the Scotch. The inside of his mouth was warm and peaty. Like a drunk in an earthquake, everything was feeling A-okay to him. He stifled a belch.

"It's not very stable where I am," he told her. "Things change a lot."

"I'm not a very stable person, lover," she said seriously, dropping into her best radio voice. *"Or haven't you noticed? The guy they sent up here to see you—he thinks your condition is reversible. He wants to help you. But I personally don't give a fuck, because I find you more exciting this way. In fact, you're giving me a contact high right now . . ."*

The car coasted off the motorway and up a side road. The inertia pulled him away from Nicki, from her TV image. He narrowed his eyes to keep her in focus. It was a task. He wanted to lie down on the seat, kick off his shoes, curl up with his head in her lap, her video lap.

"Max," said a hollow, throaty voice, whispering so as not to be overheard, as if the car had ears. It was not Nicki's voice. It was vibrating thinly out of the rear speakers. *"Max, don't do this alone. Be careful. Don't try to do this on your own."*

He raised his head to see through the smoked glass into the front seat. The driver was immobile in silhouette, both hands on the wheel, waiting for the light to change.

Nicki looked at Max inquiringly. As if she could see him. As if she

really and truly could. But she was used to playing for microphones and cameras. She was an ace actress. She had been good enough to fool him before.

He looked around to see where he was. Outside, a blue-white store window shone coolly back at him like a miniature drive-in movie screen. It was an electrical appliance store. Within the display window was a row of demonstrator television sets, all tuned to the same channel. On each screen was a middle-aged man's face. It seemed to be looking directly at Max.

He rolled down the back seat window to get a better look. As he did so, the largest of the sets, a nineteen-inch TeleRanger identical to the one he had at home rose up a few inches on its wooden legs and lumbered forward, crashing through the plate glass and oozing down onto the sidewalk amoeba-fashion. Shattered glass rained down on the cement.

Max dropped his empty drink glass and crooked his neck out into the night air to see how good this hallucination really was. Whether it would stand up under close study.

The TeleRanger thumped like a phocomelus to a place on the corner behind two newspaper vending machines. One was for the Toronto Star. *Racing Driver Killed in Fiery Crash,* read the headline. The other machine was for a local sex paper. The console nudged a space for itself between them and sat down, swelling and contracting with gigantic breaths from the exertion, its fleshy surface (walnut veneer?) rippling with musculature, shot through now with large veins, downy with soft surface hairs backlighted by the mercury vapor street lights.

On the TV screen, pulsing and distorting with each breath of the set, was the face of Brian O'Blivion. The face spoke again, its voice now audible from the set's speaker grille which was only a foot or two from the curb.

"Be cagey, Max. Be wary. Beware the optometrist . . . the spectacle of him . . . It's a dinner of truth and lies. Eat it, digest it, but keep in mind that there's much better cuisine available . . ."

The light changed to green and the limo sped on, leaving the TV set behind. It huddled breathing and shivering on the corner as Max hung his pale face out the window, hoping to catch the last of the broadcast.

Inside the limousine, Nicki could remain silent no longer. She vied for his attention.

"What is it this time, lover? Something I said?"

Aw, shit, thought Max.

He closed his eyes, rested his head on the back of the luxurious seat,

felt for the controls to the ten-inch set and played with the knobs until he succeeded in turning Nicki off for the time being.

Max was jolted softly out of his nap.

The limo halted in front of a shabby, cut-rate store in a particularly dark section of a shabby, cut-rate street. It was a neighborhood he did not know. The store's sign identified it as SPECTACULAR OPTICAL INTERNATIONAL. A wholesale outlet, Max reasoned. No consumer in his right mind would shop here.

The driver kept the motor running and unlocked the back seat doors by remote control. The rear speakers switched on.

"Here we are, sir. Hope you weren't too cramped back there."

"I was fine," said Max wryly. He rubbed sleep out of his eyes. His back ached. "I guess this isn't Pittsburgh."

"No sir, it's not. Shall I open the door for you?"

"I think I can make it. I've made it this far."

The chauffeur raised his gloved hand to the brim of his hat and saluted in the rearview mirror, snapping his hand down like a pilot in an airline commercial. Max had yet to see his face.

"Au revoir, sir," came the voice.

"Yeah," said Max. "You, too."

He climbed out.

It was either an outlet store or a damned good front. The display in the window was covered with two-year-old dead flies and the window itself was papered with advice on how to get glasses paid for by welfare and old age benefit schemes. CLOSED, warned the sign, PLEASE CALL AGAIN. Max was about to arrange to do just that, when he heard the limousine drive off without him.

He tried the doorknob.

It was unlocked.

Most of the lights were on. The wholesale showroom was crowded with dusty racks of standard junky fashion glasses in the usual disposable styles. Set out in the middle of the floor, however, were a few incongruously sleek plastic cases holding several dozen brand-new frames and sunglasses of a much more exotic and expensive breed. Max circled the cases, trying to figure out what it all meant.

Set up against one wall was a clean, new demonstration counter, basically a light box covered with frames held in place by translucent plastic strips—a salad bar for the nearly blind.

There was definitely no one here. He was alone to make his selection.

He picked a pair of squarish black hornrims from the rack, tried them on. In the small customer mirror, a familiar face stared back at him in stark detail. His own face but changed somehow; with a pretentious air added, like a movie director who took himself too seriously. He scowled and took them off.

The rack had small built-in drawers at the bottom, containing styles there was no room to display. He opened the first level, lifted out another pair, lowered it onto the bridge of his nose.

These frames already had lenses in them. They were sunglasses, much better than the pair he owned. For the moment the reduced glare was a relief.

Max took in the rest of the room, hoping to come upon some detail that would give him a clue as to why he had been brought here.

The decor was what Max had always thought of as Middle American Posh. On the walls were posters and banners advertising the latest generation of Spec Op graphics and slogans. One, styled after a stained-glass church window, declared: THE EYE IS THE WINDOW OF THE SOUL . . . SOULFUL STYLING BY SPECTACULAR OPTICAL. Another, a chic guy-girl-car effort, read: LOVE COMES IN AT THE EYE —W.B. Yeats. SPECTACULAR OPTICAL HELPS.

Either Max was blacking out or the glasses he was wearing were fast-acting photochromatics. He took them off. They were. He squinted up at the guy and girl in the car. They were having a hell of a good time. But they weren't even looking at one another. Like they had been married for ages.

"If love comes in at the eye," Max muttered to himself, "what happens when you wear prescription lenses?"

"You get optically correct love coming in at the eye," said a baritone voice. "That's even better."

Max was startled. He turned warily.

"I hope you realize you're playing with dynamite."

The tailored salesman came out of the doorway from the back room and approached Max.

"That's our spring line. Top secret stuff." He closed in with his hands out, his fingers aimed for Max's eyes. "I brought them with me for our trade show here in town later this week. I hope you won't sell us out to the competition."

Max put the sunglasses back on. He could hardly see the man striding toward him. He braced himself.

"Max Renn? I'm Barry Convex."

He was. Custom-made suit, starched white shirt, diagonally-striped tie. Very impressive. Like a government spokesman, or an insurance

salesman. Instead of shaking hands he reached for Max's face, removed the photochromatics. He was not wearing glasses himself.

"I think that machinery you're wearing is a bit too much for the shape of your face. Overwhelms you. Try something more spidery, more delicate."

Max was having trouble with the overhead fluorescents. They made everything, including Convex's scrubbed face and the underdone veal cutlet of waved hair on his forehead, too hard to take. He wished he had the shades back on. He riffled through the other glasses in the drawer.

"How about these?" He came up with a pair of wire rims. They rested effeminately on his nose. "Spidery enough?"

Convex adjusted the glasses so they were seated properly, a strangely intimate act. The man's nails were manicured, buffed and polished.

He withdrew to check his handiwork. Then he reached out and removed the wire rims, closed the drawer on them.

"You look lousy in glasses," he said.

He patted Max's back and directed him to the other room of the store.

"Max. Let me tell you something about myself. So you'll see where my head is at. Where I'm coming from."

He used the words as if they were catch-phrases in a sales pitch. Max had encountered his type before, back when he was starting out at Channel 83, buying and selling sponsor ad time. It didn't bother him. He went along with it. He had always believed in playing dumber than he really was. It was a survival technique. It tended to give him the advantage sooner or later.

"Max, I began my career as a lens grinder. Started off grinding lenses for pocket magnifying glasses in school, can you believe that? Got into glasses, then microscopes, then—well, the sky was the limit, know what I mean?"

A veritable rags-to-riches story, thought Max.

"Bear with me. You might find this interesting." He flashed Max an expression of camaraderie. "We were doing some very, very sophisticated zero light weapon scopes for military application. Developed something called an *image accumulator*. It used a system of vidicon tubes, a closed circuit where we amplified indistinct signals from tube to tube to tube, to create images where the physics books said there wasn't enough light for an image to exist. We made a kind of helmet with conical fiber optics—didn't want to get into lasers—and you know? The damnedest thing happened to some of the boys

who were testing her in the field."

Max thought he knew what was coming. "They all got brain cancer. Came in at the eye."

Convex shrank from Max like a rejected lover.

"Now that's a hell of a thing to say. Hell of a damned negative thing."

A few more steps, however, and he made a full professional recovery. He pumped himself up again. This was too important for him to allow personal feelings to slow him down. He smiled crookedly. Straight teeth, though, Max noticed.

"You've got a strange sense of humor," said Convex.

"Yeah. I thought it was pretty funny."

"Max. I'm a pretty straightforward kind of guy. And I suddenly find myself dealing with things. You know, freaky things."

"It must be hard, Barry."

The salesman ignored the last comment and led Max deeper into the storeroom. Blocks of shipping cartons were piled everywhere, creating a fortress-like maze.

"Anyway." They came to a cleared area with a small table at the center. Next to the table was a folding chair, and on the table rested one specially reinforced carton, heavier and more durable than the others. "Here she is. This is our little sweetheart, the prototype. The only one in existence right now. This is the little number that started it all."

Chapter Eleven

Convex dipped his arms into the carton and came up with an extremely futuristic helmet affair, quite large, obviously the product of the latest scientific research.

It reminded Max of a portable eye examination machine built to the specifications of a science fiction illustrator. The engineer-designers had had a field day, constructing one of their pathologically practical wet dreams in solid three dimensions.

The salesman brushed away bits of packing foam and cradled it proudly in his arms.

"We got pretty deep into our campaign for her. Gotta sell the hell out of it no matter how good it is. And the name—military boys are suckers for a snappy name. Sales came up with Accumicon—for image accumulator."

In its way the headpiece *was* bizarrely beautiful. Almost a techno-interpretation of a piece of medieval armor. It would have fit right in with the rest of the objects in Brian O'Blivion's office.

"I'd buy Accumicon," said Max, admiring its perverseness in spite of himself. "Yeah. I'd buy that."

God help me, he thought.

Convex was reluctant to let go of it. He rubbed a smudge off its molded carapace with a soft finger.

"She worked like a charm in the lab. Light, comfortable, an extension of the body. Turned a man into a zero light fighting machine . . ."

His expression underwent a subtle sea change from pride to petulance.

"But then, under simulated combat conditions, the boys who used her began to hallucinate. Images began to appear that weren't really there—and the images lasted for hours after they stopped wearing her. Took us quite a while to figure out that the boys were starting to project *their own* images through the optical accumulator, images that came from their brains and ended up exciting the vidicon mosaic like an electron gun. Video hallucinations, Max, that we have recorded on tape."

"I'd love to see them."

"Classified, I'm afraid. That was Army research. We don't control

it." Convex stroked the headshell lovingly. This was his baby.

Max couldn't take his eyes off her. She was pleasing to the eye, in an antiseptic, modernist sort of way. He had the sense that he was being interviewed as a potential suitor.

Convex's cheek twitched.

"But what we would like to control, Max," he said breathlessly, "is *you."*

Neither man moved.

The immaculate lines and sleek, tapered components of the helmet became the absolute center of their attention, its raised visor reflecting the dispersed lighting of the room with the wide-angle efficiency of a fly's eye.

Max broke the strained silence. "A terrific idea," he said. "I need a sense of direction."

Convex nodded decisively. Max almost expected him to click his heels and present arms.

"Max, I'd like you to try her on for size. I would like you to record one of your hallucinations—now. Then I would like to take that tape back with me to home base for analysis."

"How do you know my hallucinations will be any better than the others?"

"Max . . . we're dealing in mental images on tape, done not the way it's always been done before, but directly. If it could be controlled, you could create a video narrative directly from your brain. Thousands of characters, exotic locales, amazing special effects. All for free. Why hire a thousand people just to fill a frame this big? Just *think* them into it."

Convex set the Accumicon helmet gently on the table, where it balanced on its base like a scaled-up model of some devolved insect's head.

"Can you grasp the opportunity I'm giving you? The artists of the future would be those individuals who could focus their VIDEODROME hallucinations, shape them, control them . . . I'm talking about you, Max. I think you're the first."

"You might want to think twice before you recruit me, Barry. See, I've got a problem or two I'm wrestling with right now, and I'm not quite sure I'm winning. My dreams are actually pretty messy. Not what you'd call suitable prime-time fare."

"Oh, we know all about that. What you've been experiencing is nothing more than—"

Max cut him off. "For instance, I have this big TV set that follows me around like a dog and talks to me, tells me things. He even talks

about you. He told me not to trust you. Should I believe him?"

"I'd only listen to him if he's an established brand name."

"Is that supposed to be a pun?"

"Seriously, Max . . . Your imaginary friend sounds to me like a hallucinatory self-projection of your unconscious. An unusual manifestation of alter ego. It's really just you, telling yourself what you're afraid of."

"Where did you learn jargon like that?"

"That was why Dr. Brand was recruited for the project. We felt we needed a professional psychological interpretation of the hallucinatory graphics."

"You know what?" said Max. "I'm beginning to think that you—and this invention of yours—are my greatest works. I'm finding it hard to keep believing in you, even though I know I'm imagining the whole thing."

"Then why not immortalize us on tape? We'd look good in a frothy sitcom, don't you think?"

Max considered, conscious of the inescapable visceral revulsion he felt for the thing on the table between them.

Convex touched a concealed switch and the helmet activated with a high-frequency whine at the very borderline of human hearing. Its circuitry powered, the helmet began to glow with an unearthly light.

Max stalled. "Do I get to keep the copyright? I mean, I'd hate to see it show up as a Movie-of-the-Week and not get paid for it."

"Max, I'm trying to help you."

"What makes you think I need your help, Barry?"

"None of our test subjects has returned to, well, to normality. They're all in need of intensive psychiatric care. Now, you seem to be functioning reasonably well—so far. I'd like to find out why. And I think an analysis of one of your hallucinations would be the right place to start."

"Do I get to choose my own analyst?"

Convex rotated the helmet so that its streamlined visor was pointing at Max.

"How about Nicki Brand? I want to see her. I want to see Nicki."

"Oh, you'll see her. Well?"

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Max picked up the helmet. It was lightweight, no heavier in his hands than styrofoam, though the underside contained a complex roadmap of flexible circuitry. As he held it the top glowed more

luminously. Bundles of wiring showed through the curved plastic, suggesting X-rays of neurological connections.

"Will it hurt?"

"It won't hurt *you.* You may find yourself moving in and out of hallucination for a while after this is all over. You'll wake up tomorrow morning with a headache."

"I've already got one. What do you want me to do?"

"I think you'll find that a little S&M will be necessary to trigger off a good, healthy session."

"Why not a TV talk show? Safer, cheaper, no special effects to dream up . . ."

"Something to do with the effects of exposure to violence on the nervous system. It opens up receptors in the brain and the spine that allow the VIDEODROME signal to sink in."

Oh.

Max sat. With the salesman's help, he lowered the helmet onto his shoulders. The visor was up, the optical apparatus not yet in position. But already he felt the seductive self-reflexiveness of a giant seashell wherein his own pulse and respiration would create an ocean of sound into which he might submerse himself, be reborn . . . or drown.

This was going to be interesting.

And not really irresponsible, he rationalized. It was part of his job. After he made the tapes, Channel 83's programming would never be the same again. The new schedule would kick ass all up and down the ratings.

As he waited for the process to begin, further questions occurred to him. Convex was dickering with the left-eye opticals. Max imagined himself a football player girding for the ultimate battle in a Superbowl of the future. He spoke while he had the chance.

"Why not football?" he asked. "That's violent."

"But socially acceptable. And not very sexy." Convex's breath was minty on Max's face. "It's the thrill of forbidden fruit that gets those little synapses to spread their legs. That's the way Dr. Brand puts it."

"My TV set friend tells me that those little synapses turn cancerous under the influence of VIDEODROME."

Convex snickered and poised his hand to lower the eye shield.

"I said we'd help you, Max, and we will. First, by proving to you that your fears aren't real."

"Yeah? Nobody dies on VIDEODROME?"

"They're all third-rate actors. A death scene is the easiest thing to do. Ask Dr. Brand."

Max was already feeling claustrophobic. Convex's lily white hand shuttered the visor down over his eyes. The salesman's face broke up into a video grid.

"I think I'd like to. I'd like to ask her right now. If you don't mind."

"You'll have your chance." The voice was far away. "Now get ready."

"You mean I'm going to have to hurt *you,* Barry?"

"Not me." Convex made final adjustments and pressed a recessed switch in the molding. "Hey, I was wrong. You *do* look good in glasses . . ."

An electrical tone surged, wound down to a hum, then rose in pitch and crackled like video machine-gun fire.

The squares of the video grid turned yellow, then white, then blurred as the room lights were amplified into a blazing, scorching conflagration.

He closed his eyes quickly. But his eyelids were thin as ricepaper lanterns. He saw the blood in the veins at the backs of his retinas starting to boil. He threw his arm across the visor.

"I can't take it! Shut it off! It's too bright!"

"Christ, yes. Sorry." Convex scampered for the lights and flipped them all off except for a small worklamp in a far corner. "I forgot. How's that?"

The coruscation softened to a bearable level, the audio monitor sputtering down to a steady hum. Through the Accumicon optics, even the worklamp was amplified into a white-hot bloom of fire.

"Yeah. That's—that's better."

A multiplied repetition of Convex's face came close as another switch was flicked on the back of the helmet. Instantly a liquid crystal numerical display appeared at one side of the viewer, a digital readout accurate to a hundredth of a second.

"Okay," said Convex, "we're rolling. The taping mechanism's self-contained. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Max practiced aiming the helmet on his neck. He discovered that by an effort of concentration he could keep the field sharp. It reminded him of racking an image in and out of focus in a TV camera viewfinder, using only the muscles of his eyes.

He panned with Convex as the salesman found his way to the door.

"I'll come back for you later. You'll forgive me if I don't stay to watch. I just can't cope with the freaky stuff."

A sliver of light from the showroom stabbed in like an icepick, then faded as Convex closed the door behind him.

Max sat alone and waited for something to happen.

The Accumicon optics boosted the semi-darkness into the red end of the spectrum. The effect was warm and cozy.

He turned his head to the left.

Piles of cartons, the spaces between them red shadows, their amplified surfaces breaking up into pits and valleys.

He turned right.

More of the same, and a wall. He inclined toward it an inch, two inches and saw details he could not have discerned without the helmet. Cracks and flaws in the plastic wood surface, scuff marks that were craters, splinters that opened on the interior depths of a microworld beyond the limits of ordinary sight.

He racked the focus closer.

The empty space between his new eyes and the wall was, he discovered, made up of millions of minute grains or particles smaller than dust motes and as plentiful as atoms; the reddish tinge of the magnified light suggested that the particles might be blood cells coursing through living plasma. The rusty color reminded him of something else, too, something he was reluctant to remember. But he couldn't escape it now. It was everywhere. It was the very air he breathed. It was the whole world.

You know me, he thought. I stay away from the scary stuff. Me and Barry. He's not so dumb, is he? Either he is, or I am.

He pointed the viewer down.

There were his legs, his hands. He had never before seen his own hands so clearly. They had hairs which were as varied and remarkable as bonsai trees growing out of the backs, out of the pores. His skin had a texture not unlike the earth itself, with hills and valleys, underground streams of capillaries rushing beneath the surface . . .

"Well . . ."

A voice, filtered by the electronic humming in his ears.

". . . here we are at last."

A woman's voice? Yes. He heard sharp high heels clipping toward him across the room. He raised his masked head.

"Right where we ought to be . . ."

The network of squares in the viewer overran with redness. He concentrated and brought them together into the shape of a dress.

". . . on VIDEODROME."

She stopped a few feet in front of him.

"Nicki?!"

"That's right, lover."

He stood too quickly and reeled under the unnatural bulk of the headpiece.

And saw that the room was not what it appeared to be. It had changed.

Disoriented, he took a step backward, felt for his balance.

There was no longer chair or table near him. Only the slats of a wooden grille underfoot.

A few scant inches below the boards, water was collecting.

The wall behind him. The soft, sweating wall.

Now he saw it as never before. The strange hooks and loops, the trickling water, the electrical switch, the handprints burned into the clay . . .

He could feel the texture without reaching to touch it. The room was pressurized with humidity, alive with moisture, tickling his skin.

He raised his hand.

There was something in it. A long, heavy tube of snakeskin, slithering across his palm.

A whip.

Had Nicki handed it to him? He couldn't remember.

He scanned the room. He was alone except for a squat, aged console television set.

Like everything else, it seemed to be breathing.

He circled it slowly, trailing the tails of the lash in water.

The front of the television set, the screen, was a view of pink skin against a red clay wall. The frame showed a woman stripped to the waist, her arms raised above her head as though manacled together out of camera range. She twisted around coyly and said over her shoulder, her scarred shoulder:

"What are you waiting for, lover? Let's perform. Let's open those neural floodgates!"

Then Nicki offered him her back, and waited.

He tried to speak but his tongue was thick and hot in his mouth. His face, his body felt feverish and swollen, flushed, sweating, like the room.

His head was heavy with machinery, his brain overheated in a closed loop which fed off itself and only nourished the desire. There were no words for any of it. He couldn't have spoken to her if he wanted to now. The emotion was all and it was accumulating fast, building for relief.

He approached the set, whisked the lash over the cabinet.

She was waiting.

The thick red membranous walls around him. Glowing and pulsating from within and from without.

The whip was transformed into a living extension of his being.

He flicked his wrist. The whip snapped.

Nicki's image flinched.

He snapped it again, more strongly.

Nicki cried out in pain.

Ahh.

He slashed.

Each time Nicki screamed louder. The whip rained down furiously. The set itself shuddered and groaned; blood and white fluid oozed from the long wounds in its cabinet.

Max's arm grew weary. He paused to catch his breath. Nicki's image heightened to never-before-seen clarity.

Only now it was not Nicki.

It was Masha.

Masha, tears streaming down her face as she cringed away from him, her video image fluorescing hideously.

Max wielded the lash again, again. With each new flaying the close-up twitched more grotesquely, until it smeared off into video darkness.

Chapter Twelve

The next stroke was his last.

A rustling of video static filled the air.

Max stopped his arm. No longer could he see clearly. The forked tail of the whip snapped back and fell to rest on his own body, his own shoulders and head. He turned away, exhausted.

But he couldn't leave. The braided strands vined around him, tighter and tighter. He tried to fling them off. The tips of the lash obscured his field of view. He tore at them, dislodged what was covering his face—

Max twisted free and rolled away.

He could see.

A long distance away, a television set sputtered in a cyclone of snow and white noise. A console, like his own. It was a TeleRanger. In fact, it was his own TV. And around it a familiar disarray of books, a coffee table, a chair with clothes strewn over the back, all of it seen from far off through a framing window as in the wrong end of a telescope . . .

He flung the pillow completely away and liberated one shoulder from the tangle of sheets.

He was in his own bed. The television set churned on in the blue darkness of his living room, visible through the open bedroom door.

And then I woke up, he thought. It was all a dream.

And all he had to show for it was a migraine headache. Hardly worth the effort.

He laughed at himself.

Listen, he thought, listen—the thing is . . . what does it mean? It's all in the meaning. That's what's important. What does it mean? Okay? Okay . . .

It was very late. Or very early. Same thing. His watch was too dark to read. And his hair was in his face. He combed his fingers to clear away the cobweb-like strands on his forehead. But a latticework remained over his eyes. The hairs had an unpleasantly rough texture. And they were gray.

He stopped laughing.

The hairs did not belong to him.

He sat bolt upright.

A long, clumped form lay wrapped in the covers next to him. It was hidden except for a spray of gray hair that had fallen onto his side of the bed.

His heart caught in his chest, then began pounding like a jackhammer.

Trembling, he eased the sheet down.

In the dim room he thought he recognized the cuts on the shoulders and the sensuous curve of the arms joined above the head, the wrists bound, the hair mysteriously gone white—

He touched the shoulder. Cold.

He rolled her over.

Her eyes were open and glassy, a leather gag strapped across her mouth, a belt that could easily have been his own buckled around her wrists. Old wrists, bulging with blue veins. The face a tragic portrait of debauchery that this time had gone too far.

"Masha," he whispered. His throat wouldn't work right. "Oh, Masha."

Masha did not respond.

He ripped away the sheet and blanket.

She was half-nude, bound hand and foot, the hospital gown open at the back where day-old welts and lash marks gaped like vertical mouths cut into a rubber doll.

A very old, very cold rubber doll.

He scrabbled away from the bed. He backed to the bedroom door, then walked around to her side and very gently drew the sheet up over her head. He backed off again, and made it into the living room.

There was no one on the television screen to tell him what to do this time.

The phone was in front of the TV. He knelt. In the blue salt-and-pepper strobing his clothes appeared wrinkled, stretched, like crumpled sacks. He punched the TV off and dialed.

The phone rang for a long time.

"Yeah?"

"Harlan?"

"Yeah. What time is it . . . ?"

"It's Max." He had to get it out before his voice failed completely. "Can you come over to my apartment? Right away."

A groan on the other end of the line.

"And Harlan? Bring a camera."

"Are you serious?"

“I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

Max was having a discussion with himself in the bathroom mirror.

“No,” he argued, “no, it’s not the fact. It’s the meaning. It’s—it’s just me—telling myself . . .”

His mirror self did not comment.

Never get any help out of that son of a bitch, he thought. Look at him. He never shaves, he hasn’t had a haircut in three months, his fingernails are getting long—and his skin. Is that skin or is it wax? He hasn’t seen the sun in how long?

He reached out and poked himself in the chest for emphasis.

The medicine cabinet door swung closed, shifting the view in the mirror by a few degrees. As the mirror moved it took in the rest of the bathroom, the tub and shower, the door to the hall and the living room beyond.

Beyond the open door, a dark shadow moved away swiftly and silently between the sofa and television set.

Max gripped the sides of the basin and steeled himself. His heart began to thump in his throat, the veins on the sides of his neck standing out. He tried, but he could not make himself let go and turn around. He clenched his eyes shut and counted his heartbeats.

When he opened his eyes, the mirror view of that part of his living room was utterly motionless.

“There’s no one here,” he told himself. “My head’s playing tricks on me again. Checked the front door. It’s double-locked. Only—only Masha. Poor, darling, dead Masha . . .”

The dead don’t walk. They don’t just put down their legs and walk. Do they? No. Of course not. A dead woman in your bed means—there’s a dead woman in your bed. That’s what it means. *Dead.*

Wasn’t that right?

Call the police, he thought. Call someone.

“I called Harlan,” he said. “He’ll be here soon. He’ll know what it means. He knows how to decode anything.”

I’ll stay right here until he comes.

Right here in the goddamn bathroom. Right? Right. Lock the door. This door has got to have a lock on it.

Turn around. Check it out. *Do it.*

That’s it, kick the door shut. Now slide the end table under the doorknob. You got it.

Now you wait.

What if Harlan never comes?

Well, you'll have to live out as much of your remaining existence as you can bear right here. You've got water—you don't need food, do you? No. Not for a long time. You can breathe through the vent in the ceiling, entertain yourself by making up a TV show in the mirror, you can carry on conversations to your heart's content with the guy in the striped bathrobe who's on right now, he'll keep you on your toes, and you know you can never be sure what he'll say or do next.

Until Harlan comes.

He'll be here. He hasn't let you down yet, has he? Good old Harlan.

Till then, do yourself a favor. How about a bath?

That ought to be easy enough. Why not? Be good to yourself for once. Do it right. Nobody else is exactly pampering you at the moment. You owe it to him, to the guy in the mirror. Give him a break. Go all the way.

Max reached for the plastic bottle of Algemarin bubble bath that a one-nighter had left here more months ago than he could remember. He got the water hot enough to take his mind off of anything and everything.

He squirted the bubble bath into the swirling whirlpool. The water whipped up into a blue spume. He stood watching it through the rising mist.

He still did not care for the mound of whirlpool aeration. He shut it off, waited for the waters to subside.

The mirror was steamed up so there was no longer anyone to talk to. He was on his own. Maybe he always had been without knowing it. The people around him during the day, his staff, helpers, lovers—maybe they were all illusions, extensions of himself, fantasy wish-fulfillment projections.

If so, then so be it. Get a grip on yourself, he thought, and take charge. Shape and control your world from now on. No one else is going to do it for you. Should have been done long ago. If Harlan doesn't show, that will only confirm it. You can't rely on anyone but yourself. So get ready. You've got a lot ahead of you.

He stepped to the tub, opened his robe.

There was a sound in the other room.

A pounding. It transmitted through the thin walls, vibrating the bathroom door, the knob—

Harlan! It had to be. Old reliable Harlan.

Maybe he can't clean up any of your messes for you—no one can. But he can give you independent verification, so you'll know whether or not you're crazy. He can give you proof.

He opened the door.

A great cloud of steam billowed into the hall, obliterating the view of the living room.

Just as well.

He unlatched the front door and swung it wide.

For a moment he couldn't see anything. Then the steam cleared and a young man in a red plaid shirt and peaked hair was standing there, hands in pockets.

"Well, here I am, *patrón,"* said Harlan.

He crossed the threshold, a 35mm. and BC unit dangling from the strap around his neck, wisps of steam catching in his clothes. He plucked his glasses off and wiped them. His eyes were crusted with sleep.

"Come on in," said Max, pulling him inside.

"Camera," said Harlan. "Flashgun. What's up? You wanna be a centerfold?"

Max said, "I want you to go into my bedroom and I want you to take a look at what's in my bed. Uncover it. Don't be shy. I want pictures."

Harlan put his glasses back on, magnifying the skepticism in his eyes. "Pictures of—of what's in your bed?"

"Yeah. Do it." Max stood aside and ushered him into the living room.

"Sure. Ah, okay."

Harlan hesitated, wiped his hands on his cords, then trudged across the living room.

Max watched him disappear into the bedroom.

The living room was scattered with the usual disorder. There were still shadows hanging from the ceiling, but dawn was breaking outside and the first light of morning projected a clear blue patina over the furniture. Max could see his way around now and there was definitely no one lurking alongside the sofa or television set. He retied his robe and left the hallway.

He heard Harlan moving around. He could see the end of the bed from here, the covers hanging away from the edge of the mattress. He did not see the flashgun go off. He waited.

Harlan came back out. His head was down and he looked troubled.

"Well?"

"Ah, Max," said Harlan sadly. "I—I don't see anything."

Max stared at him.

"Ah, you didn't just want me to shoot your bed, pillows, sheets . . .

did you?" He stood there zipping the f-stop ring on his camera back and forth.

Max tore past him.

The bed was as he had left it. Sheets, pillows, bunched-up quilt. He ripped them away.

Nothing.

It was impossible. Max searched the floor, the space beneath the bed, the side against the wall . . .

"Max," said Harlan from the doorway, "are you in some kind of drug warp? I've got friends who can help. Bridey told me she came by a few days ago and you were—"

Max rose from his hands and knees. "Did you tape VIDEODROME last night?"

"Yeah." Harlan was taken aback by the question. "If it was transmitted," he said pleasantly, "the machine would have caught it. Especially since nothing was left to chance. I noticed that you—"

"I'll meet you in the lab in one hour. I want to see it."

"Jeez, Max . . ." Harlan scratched his head. Specks of dandruff settled on his shoulders like blue snow. "It's not even seven a.m. I've got a couple of things I gotta—"

Max rose to his full height and screamed, *"Harlan, I'm not just fucking around, do you understand me?"*

"Yeah? Well, *fuck you!"* Harlan's eyes bugged out against his glasses and he snarled, "I'm not just some fucking servo-mechanism you can switch on and off! You want me to—to fall outa bed and run around like an asshole, you tell me what I'm doing it for! Otherwise, I'll see you during office hours, *patrón."* He all but spat the last word.

Max rubbed his face, nodded, took a breath, another, forced himself to walk over to his friend of so long and put his arm around him.

"Yeah," he said reasonably. "No. Harlan, you're right. It's momentum. I—I'm running like an express train here. I don't know how to stop . . ."

He coaxed Harlan back out to the hallway.

"Look. I'll meet you in the lab in one hour, okay? And then we'll see if we pulled in any VIDEODROME last night. And I'll tell you what's going on. Everything. I promise. Okay?"

Max opened the front door.

Harlan closed his camera case and reconsidered. He said, "Hey, I'm sorry I freaked out on you, *patrón.* I don't work with you for the money. You know that."

"I know that," said Max lightly, patronizingly. "With pirates it's

never just the money, is it?” He concocted a tired laugh. “You want a cup of coffee?”

Harlan wavered.

Max rattled the doorknob. “No, look, I’ll meet you in the lab in one hour. Got it?”

Max locked the door and returned to the bathroom.

He splashed cold water on his face and stared into the mirror. He hardly recognized himself. His pupils were dilated like portholes into some other world.

The corners of the mirror were blurred with webs of cold steam, and beyond his own dripping face the edges of the bathroom were out-of-focus. He thought he saw steel loops mounted on a soft, sweating wall, a squat cabinet with knobs—

He whirled around.

The silver rings on the wall held only long white towels. The cabinet was an overflowing clothes hamper.

He grabbed a towel and mopped his face.

The foam in the tub had gone flat. He dipped his hand into the water. Tepid. He decided to forget the bath and reached in to pull the plug. He inserted his arm up to the elbow.

And froze.

There was something under the surface.

Something alive and yet not alive.

He yanked his arm out with a whoosh and slammed back against the sink. The porcelain edge caught him across the kidneys. He grunted in pain.

A bubbling sound filled the room and echoed off the tiles.

As he watched in disbelief, a TeleRanger console TV set rose up out of the water, out of the blue Algemarin foam like a hulking electronic Venus on the half-shell. The set swelled, breathing and snorkling as befitted a marine creature of its substantial size.

On its screen was a close-up of a woman, an anguished expression wracking her features, a leather strap tight around her wrinkled neck.

Masha.

“They killed me, Maxie,” she choked as crackling blue foam dripped down, distorting the screen. *“They killed me! I wasn’t supposed to tell you about Brian O’Blivion . . .”*

Max stood his ground. “Fuck off, will you?” he yelled. “Just fuck off! You’re a hallucinatory self-projection. I know you! You’re nothing!”

"I didn't lie to you, Maxie. VIDEODROME *is death."*

"Shut up!"

*"*VIDEODROME *is death . . ."* She fought her bonds. *"I didn't lie to you. They killed me. They killed me . . ."*

Max fell to his knees at the side of the tub and battered the set with his fists. Each blow sank deeper into the flesh of the TV, into the screen, the speaker grille, the cabinetry itself. With each blow Masha screamed.

He gave up and collapsed, sobbing wretchedly, he reached out blindly and held tightly, desperately to the set as though adrift at sea, Ishmael clinging to a floating coffin.

Masha gazed down at him. She said comfortingly, *"That's better. So much better. It will be all right, Maxie. Listen to me, Max. Look at me. LOOK AT ME."*

Max let go and fell back.

Masha's face beamed from the picture tube, no longer bruised and beaten but beatific now. The bonds that held her to the physical plane ceased to exist. Her visage floated in limbo against a blank background, loving, angelic.

"You're living in a new world now. Things are different here. And in this new world, you must listen to me. I'm the video word made flesh, Maxie."

Her face dissolved into the ether and was transformed into the face of Brian O'Blivion, also floating in timeless space.

"I'm the video word made flesh . . ."

Max's own face was illuminated by the growing brightness of the screen. He felt its cool, blissful radiance drying the tears on his cheeks.

He climbed to his feet as the set ascended out of the foam. It bumped the cracked ceiling. Max, naked, bathed in its benign glow, gazed up at it longingly as at a great mountain stretching into the clouds. He felt that if he tried hard enough, if he could make himself pure enough, he might continue to rise with it, leaving the room and this petty world behind.

As if in a trance, he mouthed the words, repeating after them:

"I'm the video word made flesh."

Part Five:

The New Flesh

Chapter Thirteen

Max paused in front of the Civic TV building long enough to light a cigarette.

The wick of his Zippo incandesced into a brilliant, blinding glare. He averted his eyes in pain.

He was not used to it yet.

The plate glass window was streaked with dew. But in its dark, reflective plane he saw a representation of himself standing with one hand in the pocket of his leather jacket, the other holding the silver lighter, its blazing orange-and-blue flame as bright as a torch.

And on his shoulders, the mantis-head skull-piece of the image accumulator.

At this hour of the morning there were no pedestrians on the sidewalk and very few automobiles. That made it easier. In his present condition he resembled an escapee from a grade-B science fiction movie. Somebody would probably holler cop.

He panned up to take in the building. The upper stories captured the rising sun in its fierceness, the flaming wafer of it resurrected once more in the sky. It was too much so soon. He spread his hand over his eyes.

His hand went through the visor.

There was no visor, no helmet.

In the plate glass he saw now only the reflection of his bare head. At the same time the glare subsided to a normal level. His own eyes stared back at him like dark bullet holes burned into his face.

He threw away the cigarette, sorted through his keys, found the one to the main entrance and let himself in.

Virtually no one was here yet. The night technician would be in Master Control, still riding the STL for the graveyard shift. But if Max avoided the hall . . .

He got to the stairway using a circuitous route and descended to the lab.

The padlocks were unlatched.

Max's ace engineer was resting his buttocks against the bench, waiting. The lab had the stony chill of a crypt. The ancient furnace hadn't had time to do its work.

"Come on in."

The main videocorder was open behind Harlan's head, but its reels were empty.

"You looked at the tape already?"

"No. But I'm sure last night's performance would be my favorite episode. The one starring Max Renn."

"What? Did you bring it in on the dish or not?"

"Not exactly. After all, I wouldn't have recognized you in that kinky outfit you were wearing, now would I?"

"Harlan, cut the crap. I want to see the transmission. You got all of it?"

Harlan sighed. He said sadly, "There was no tape."

There was a quality to his voice which Max had not heard before. Gone was any semblance of snappy repartee or the jaunty, beleagured determination that went with his pirate's role. His defenses were down and there was no longer any attempt at charm. The mask was off.

Max looked at him as if for the first time. Who is this guy I've been working with for so long? he wondered.

"There was no VIDEODROME transmission last night?"

"Not last night," said Harlan soberly. "Not ever."

"What are you talking about?"

There was a knock on the door.

Harlan looked up joylessly.

"I'm out of my depth now, *patrón.*" He slumped from the workbench and crossed to the door, stretching it out as long as he could. "I had to bring in the reinforcements."

The door opened.

"Max," said Barry Convex. In a three-piece suit. Even at this hour.

Lift the scales from my eyes, thought Max. He planted his feet firmly, set his weight and nodded with a bitter smirk.

"An intriguing combination." He flicked his eyes between Harlan and Convex, an unlikely duo if ever there was one. "Very interesting."

Your move, fuckers, he thought. I'm here. I've always been here. I always will be here. You think you can say the same?

Convex, ever the personable salesman, said, "Don't let me interrupt."

Max affected bemused detachment. "I think I was saying something like, 'What are you talking about?' "

Harlan withdrew to his workbench and reconnected with his VTR, his security blanket.

“I was playing you tapes, Max. Pre-recorded cassettes.”

“The show wasn’t transmitted? You didn’t track it and lock onto it?”

Harlan shuffled his feet.

“It wasn’t an accident that I got to see VIDEODROME,” Max volunteered. “You made it happen. They sent you to me. You’ve been with them all along.”

Harlan said, “It was coming from an Accumicon playback module we installed in the furnace room next to the lab. It’s too dangerous to transmit. VIDEODROME has never been transmitted on an open broadcast circuit. Not yet.”

“But why? Why go through all that?”

“We needed a guinea pig. Somebody who would respond to VIDEODROME. And we want Channel 83. It’s small, but it’s a start.”

Harlan knew; all along he knew.

Max turned to the salesman, who was standing by on the sidelines where he couldn’t get hurt. Letting Harlan do his dirty work for him. Watching us both battle it out so he can pick up the spoils. We’ve both been manipulated. Does Harlan realize that?

“I guess Barry sent you here, what? Two years ago? It has been two years, hasn’t it, Harlan?”

“Two wonderful years,” admitted Harlan.

“Why?”

“To get you involved,” the engineer answered sincerely. “To expose you to the VIDEODROME signal.”

Harlan was as earnest and apologetic as when he had played back that first fifty-three seconds. Max remembered him standing by helpfully.

With his back to the screen the whole time.

“It didn’t affect you because you never watched it!” said Max. “You knew what was there. You didn’t have to see it.”

“Yeah. It really does work on just about anybody.”

“Nicki Brand?”

Convex took over as if on cue. “Nicki’s a special case, Max. She already had a certain built-in tolerance to that sort of material when she came to us. However, with the way we’ve refined our techniques lately, I think I can safely say, yes, everybody who watches it.”

He came forward and peered into Max’s eyes.

“But why would anybody watch it? Why would anybody watch a scum show like VIDEODROME? Why did *you* watch it?”

Max stared him down. “Business reasons.”

“Sure,” said Convex smugly. “Sure. And what about the other

reasons? Why deny that you get your kicks out of watching torture and murder?"

Max wanted to fill in the cute cleft in Convex's chin with his white knuckles. But Harlan restrained him.

"You murdered Masha Borowczyk, didn't you, *fuck?* Did you enjoy that?"

Convex easily sidestepped the blow. As it was his plastered-down morning wet-look hair did not even get mussed. Harlan separated them.

"North America is getting soft, *patrón,"* said the engineer, a faraway look shading his dark eyes. "And the rest of the world is getting tough. Very, very tough. We're entering savage new times, and we're going to have to be pure, and direct, and strong to survive them."

He reseated his wire rims higher on his nose, and the grim, humorless attitude of the fanatic set his lips in a pencil-thin line. Now Max really did see him for the first time. At last, he thought. The worm finally turns.

"You," Harlan continued, lecturing like a Trotskyite, "and this, ah, cesspool you call a television station, and your people who wallow around in it, and, ah, your 'viewers' who watch you do it . . . you're rotting us away from the inside. We intend to stop that rot."

"We're going to start with Channel 83, Max," Convex said. "We're gonna use it for our first authentic transmissions of VIDEODROME. I have a hunch it's gonna be very popular—for awhile."

Max backed away. It was a cosmic joke, a dirty trick played by God. "I've got to be hallucinating now, right? I mean, you two can't possibly be real." His lips curled back at the absurdity of it.

"We did record your hallucinations, Max," said Convex placatingly. "As I said we would. And we did analyze them." He reached into his breast pocket. "You're ready for something new."

"That's terrific."

Convex held up a videocassette. Its casing was black and shiny, glinting like the soft, polished body of an arachnid.

And it was breathing.

Max wanted to knock it from his hand and crush it underfoot. But something held him back. He felt a force like a mighty wind blowing against him, from the cassette itself.

"What do you want from me?" he shouted over the energy field that was howling in his ears.

"Why, I want you to open up, Max. Open up to me."

Convex grabbed him under the ribcage with his short arms and unzipped Max's jacket, unbuttoned his shirt.

The room, the walls, the charged air began to twitch and distort.

Max watched as if it were happening to someone else. He saw himself flattened against the wall in the center of a video storm, his shirttails flapping aside to expose the slit opening in his stomach again as the weakness in his gut gave way to admit Convex's prerecorded missal.

"I've got something I want to play for you."

Convex rammed the cassette in, his hand entering up to the wrist.

"Do yourself a favor, Max. Don't try to fight it. It's too late for that now. You're only making it difficult for yourself. Don't take it so hard."

He removed his hand and Max collapsed forward, clutching his innards to hold himself together. He felt that he had been gutted. He tried to stand. He couldn't.

"Give us what we want. Then it won't hurt anymore. Come on over with the white folks. It's what you've secretly wanted all along, isn't it? Be a part of us. We're the Big Picture now. Be a part of the future . . ."

Max attempted to crawl. He saw Harlan bending over him guiltily. For old times' sake.

"We want what you've got, Max," said Convex. "And we're going to get what we want one way or another. It will be so much better this way. Believe me . . ."

Max doubled over, gasping for breath.

Convex left him and strolled to the door, chest out, swinging his arms confidently.

Max needed a hand. He reached out for something to hold onto.

"Harlan . . ." he wheezed.

But, despite the ambivalence in his eyes now, Harlan straightened and loped out of the lab, following Convex.

Max was alone.

He reached down into the depths and found what didn't belong there. It was hard to get a grip on it. It was slippery but he held on and would not let go.

He pulled his hand out.

He had *something.* It came out into the open partially digested, colored by the soft parts of himself.

It was not the cassette.

It was the gun he had introjected and absorbed the other night. By now it was slimy and veined, jellied and pink and ready to be born anew—the Walther PPK automatic pistol.

Clinging fast to the last thing he had to hold onto, he dragged his body out of the lab and propped up against the crumbling plaster beneath the stairs. He was seething inside, trying to heal.

He raised his bloody fist and took a good look at what he had to work with.

The handgun had attached itself, fused to his marrow. It retained its basic character under the layers of flesh and bone which had accrued around it. As he watched, the protective placentalike membrane burst open and extensions of living gun metal grew out of the stock and wrapped tightly around his wrist, burrowing into the back of his hand and deep into his forearm, connecting with his arteries and sinews. Animated cables snaked out of the clip and penetrated his palms like living nails. The pistol fibrillated and expanded as it pumped his blood, his life through its gears and chambers.

What pain there was did not last as his hand metamorphosed and became potent, larger than life. And he knew that nothing would ever hurt again.

The new living weapon that was his body wouldn't let it.

He buried his hand under his jacket and zipped the front halfway. With his old arm he pulled himself to his feet. His legs were wobbly, but he would make it.

He dragged himself up the stairs after them all.

"Max! Wow . . . !"

Bridey ceased slitting open the morning mail and dropped the letter opener. She came around to help him.

"Max? God. Do you recognize me?"

"I look that bad, do I?"

She brushed paint flakes from the back of his jacket and led him behind the desk. Only two or three sleepy people were passing in the hall. They hardly looked up. From an open door somewhere a typewriter clacked away in a death-rattle.

"You've been gone for days, Max. Are you all right?"

"I haven't been gone for days. Just seems like it."

"You *have,* Max. What have you been doing? You smell, well . . ."

"I sweat a lot when I work. Where are they?"

"Where's who? You better let me get you cleaned up. Coffee?"

Max laughed, a sputter with a little red bubble at the end. "Where's Moses?"

"Oh, he's in a meeting with Raphe." She took his face in her hands. "You promised me you were going to take care of yourself."

“As a matter of fact, I talked to a psychiatrist yesterday. A lady shrink.”

“You’re lying to me, Max.”

“I don’t lie, Bridey. You don’t either. I trust you. Tell me what I need to know.”

“I don’t know what to say. Um, I think you’d better get yourself together and get in there soon, though. Something’s going on.”

“Ahh. Comes the revolution.”

“It’s very weird, Max. They won’t even tell me about it. Moses and Raphe have been talking about a new approach for Civic TV. Are you gonna come back and turn it around again? ’Cause I’m gonna quit if you don’t.”

“I don’t have to come back, Bridey. I never left. I invented Civic TV. It came right outa here.” He tapped his temple with his left index finger. “Where are they now? Board Room?”

“I could tell them you want to talk.” She picked up the inter-office phone. “But first you ought to get—”

He took the phone from her, hung it up.

“Don’t. Don’t tell them anything.”

“But Max—”

“I’ll be in my office. And Bridey? No calls.”

He staggered past her and let himself in. He bumped the door shut and leaned there. He kept his right hand under his jacket, holding himself Napoleon-style.

The office was dark, the blinds down. But he didn’t need any more light. He didn’t need anything more than what he had with him.

He opened the connecting door a fraction of an inch.

Sticky intervals of koto music echoed out of the Board Room.

Moses and Raphael sat with their backs to him, clicking pens against their teeth. They were watching *Samurai Dreams.*

“I know it’s kinda slow and formal,” Moses was saying in that languorous, bored voice of his, “but that’s my point. It’s a natural breakthrough show for the family audience at, say, six p.m. It’s historical Japan, it’s got costumes. We play it educational . . .”

“With that girl in it?” said Raphael. “C’mon. I think you’d have a better shot playing it for laughs. We dub in a funny track and it’s a comedy. Nice, gentle . . .”

“Aha.” Moses’s cap of dry hair nodded, catching the luminosity of the TV screen in front of the long table like a halo. “And you’d be the one to write it.”

“Yeah, I would! I used to write in high school. I haven’t lost it.”

Max swung the door open.

The two men ducked at the intrusion.

“Hi, Max,” said Moses, getting up.

Raphe wheeled around in his chair. “Max! you’re just in time to throw some light on an interesting problem . . .”

Max drew his handgun.

“Don’t!” suggested Moses.

Without one more second’s deliberation Max aimed, cocked and opened fire.

The first bullet smashed into Moses’s elbow, the second tore through his chest, the third struck God knew where; it didn’t make any difference. Moses hit the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Max, God! Don’t!” Raphe cowered against a mural representation of the skyline of the city he was licensed to serve.

Two more shots drilled ragged holes straight through Raphe’s shiny pate. Blossoms of blood decorated the wall in the shape of poinsettias. Raphe slid to the floor, taking several glasses and ash trays with him.

Max’s aim was improving.

A babble outside. Running feet. The door burst open.

Bridey let out a shriek.

“Max! Are you hurt? What happened? What—?”

“They killed us,” he said, doubling over and staggering to the door so as not to lose his balance, his momentum. “They killed us . . .”

Chapter Fourteen

Somebody else started to scream.

Bridey went into action. She held back the crowd with her wiry arms and pleaded, “Give us a chance, will you? Give us some air to breathe!”

Then she attended to Max, ready to comfort him, to take his head in her lap if need be, to tear off a piece of her petticoat if she had one, to bandage him if she could but find the wound.

“Maxie? *What’s going on?”*

But he wrenched free before she had a chance. Bent in half, he bulled his way through the congregation of curiosity-seekers and hobbled into the hall.

Their faces tilted and swam before him.

They seemed as much in a slate of shock as Max. Where had they come from? It was one of life’s imponderables. But here they were, the crowd from nowhere that never misses an accident.

Max caromed by a bewildered woman from the secretarial pool. She was excavating the bottom of her purse, perhaps to find an Instamatic. He shouldered into the storage room next to the Canada Dry drink machine, heaved the door shut.

A second later Bridey slipped away and followed him in.

She had a miserable, just-tell-me-what-you-want look on her face, like a wife who has been abandoned on her wedding day.

“Max . . . !”

He ignored her and tunneled deeper between boxes of supplies, stationery, staple gun ammunition, rubber bands and rubber cement, all useless now. He found the other door, the delivery entrance. It was unlocked.

“God damn it, Max,” she called after him, “why won’t you let me help you?”

Her eyes were brimming. For the first time her makeup was less than perfect. It didn’t matter. She looked better this way. She didn’t know that, of course, never would, and wouldn’t believe it if anyone tried to tell her, especially him. But it was true.

At her back silhouettes grouped outside the frosted-glass door. She would do her best to stall them till Hell froze over or he told her

otherwise. He loved her for that. He had never thought of it until now, but it was true.

And pointless. A few years ago, about the time he came out of college hunting up his first job—perhaps if he had met her then it would have worked. But he had ignored the nesting instinct, and now it was too late. Too busy laboring to make real his private fantasies, his chance had passed away as quietly as a pouring of sand and there was no way left to make it up. It had not occurred to him that he was ever in danger of missing anything important; if anyone had tried to tell him, he had not heard. Bridey was timid; he probably would not have listened to her, either. And now his options were used up, gone and never coming back.

"So long, Bridey," he said. "And thanks. Try not to worry."

"But—"

"Where I'm going, I won't have anything to worry about. Believe me."

"I—I want to come with you."

The tide was rising higher outside the hall door. A security guard knocked repeatedly.

"You wouldn't like it there. Trust me. This time I know what I'm talking about."

He opened the delivery door with his left hand.

"Remember the way it happened, and tell it right. The truth, Bridey. Only the truth."

"You know me, boss."

"And you know me."

"But I don't know what the truth is anymore. Whatever happened back there in the office—you don't have to go! I can say—"

"They'd never believe it. Besides, you'd only betray me, too, sooner or later. You wouldn't mean to, but you would."

"But I—I love you, Max!" There. She had said it, for all the good it would do. "I'd never—"

"That's why. And that's a fact. I never lie, either."

I'll never see the inside of the station again, he thought. Not in this life.

In the alley, a carpenter was shouldering the weight of new doors and window frames to the studio loading bay without complaint. Max felt for him. It was uphill all the way.

Max hid his face and marched toward an underpass. He zipped his jacket, stuffed both hands into his pockets and did not stop when he reached the street. He moved ahead at a fast pace and lost himself in

the cheerless procession of conditioned sleepwalkers on their way to work.

It was easier than it should have been. No one paid him any mind. Each one he passed appeared totally self-absorbed, too busy starring in the movie of his or her own life to notice one more extra lurking in the background.

For a few blocks he wished he could change places with any one of them. Permanently.

But he had something more to do, a mission. There was no way to get around it. What lay ahead was bound to be even more important than what had gone before.

It was also too crucial to chance a misstep now from weariness or fatigue. He needed breathing space, time to think. Besides, were he to be picked up by the authorities now, before it was done, it would all have been for nothing. And the stakes were too high to let that happen.

The morning was warm, a buttermilk overcast wending in from the shore to raise the humidity to an unendurable level. The nearer he got to the docks the more oppressive was the hothouse effect. The streets became narrower and less dense as the air became stickier with moisture that was like mucilage. His clothing stuck to him like flypaper.

The streets on this side all funneled down to the docks. Once there, he might jump and shimmy across to stow away on one of the foreign-bound freighters. But he couldn't let himself do it. He had been put here for a purpose; no matter that the full pattern had not yet unfolded. It was his lot.

A dark ship of unknown registry was lying at anchor in the bay, taking the morning light on its black, unmarked bow. Perhaps through a temperature inversion it appeared closer now than the last time he had seen it. Wet ropes and lanterns hung motionless in the thick, still air. Beyond, partially obscured by mist, the hump of Centre Island loomed like a watery grave marker for the city.

Max clambered through a rent in the chain link fence, skirted the few private pleasure craft and hurried on to the unrented berths, moving quickly to avoid attention. He catwalked dilapidated pilings until he arrived at the first of a fleet of several small commercial fishing vessels tied up for repairs.

ELIZABETH DANE II, read the nameplate.

She was abandoned and listing at an alarming angle, taking on water below deck. Her sides were corroded with mineral streaks the

color of rust, like dried tears of blood. An official notice proclaimed, THIS VESSEL CONDEMNED. Next to the notice a row of dead starfish had been brutally crucified to the starboard side with heavy construction nails.

No one could be watching him now, he was sure, though he felt a presence somewhere behind his back. He fought down his paranoia and climbed awkwardly aboard using one hand.

One look in the hold and he knew he was not the first fugitive to take refuge here.

Nets and serpentine ropes had been cleared to make room for three or four man-sized indentations padded with newspapers and rags. Bottles, cans and empty cigarette packages littered every other empty space. He found the clutter oddly heartening.

He eased into a molded depression among the driest of the cardboard cartons, hugged his knees, lowered his head and tried to rest.

His muscles unwound and he began to doze. Lazy water sodden with floating debris lapped the sides of the boat, gently rocking him to the steady crooning of distant harbor activity. His arms drooped, the tension draining out of his body.

"Oh, Maxie, they took you in . . ."

His eyes snapped open.

"They really took you to the cleaners. I said you were under attack . . ."

He wasn't alone. He sat up apprehensively and focused through the meager light in the scummy hold.

Nestled comfortably opposite him was a TV set. Left here by one of the previous tenants? No such luck. It was the TeleRanger, no longer mutilated but breathing happily in the salt air, quivering as usual. It was the old story. You can run, he thought, but you can't hide.

He felt something akin to relief.

"I knew you'd be back," he said.

Onscreen, a two-shot of Moses and Raphael, more or less as they were when Max had interrupted them in the Board Room.

"But you wouldn't listen."

"Don't tell me that, Moses. That's not what I want to hear."

"What you want to hear, we're not going to tell you."

"That's right, that's right," Raphe chimed in. *"Because what you want to hear is not true!"*

"We're dead, Max," said Moses. *"You killed us."*

"What else is new?" said Max.

"Right, right," said Raphael, a prick even unto death. *"Somebody told*

you we were the enemy and you swallowed it. But I understand. That woman, that Nicki—very hot, very exhilarating. And Barry Convex? Amiable, convincing. Who wouldn't believe it? You wanted to be convinced that VIDEODROME *was . . . what was it?"*

" 'A giant hallucination machine.' "

"Yeah," added Rahael. *" 'You watch it and you get stoned.' "*

The two chuckled and wagged their heads. When their heads stopped moving, they lap-dissolved into the face of none other than Brian O'Blivion.

"But you were thinking skin deep, my friend. You were a skin deep sea diver. The television tube becomes the Fallopian tube of the unconscious, the video word becomes flesh . . ."

Max covered his head with his arms, as O'Blivion dissolved away and became Masha.

"You haven't joined us yet, Maxie. You haven't let go. And now they've got you right where they want you . . ."

No, it was not Masha.

It was Raphael again.

Max covered his eyes. But he could still see them.

"But at least you're inside now . . ."

"And now that you're inside VIDEODROME, *you know what you have to do? You become the . . ."*

"I know! I know what I have to do. Leave me—"

"What do you have to do, Max? Tell us."

"I have to—to—"

"Yes? Yes? We're waiting, and we've got an awfully long time to wait. But you don't. And neither does the rest of the world."

"I can't put it into words. It's not clear. But I'll know it when it comes. I'll know—"

"The word, Max, the word is all-important. Give us the word . . ."

Max gestured angrily for them to go away. The handgun waved, uglier and more uncontrollable than ever.

Raphael reached up to cover the screen from the other side, a fruitless gesture.

"No, no, Max! Not again. Please, no . . . !"

Not a bad idea. Leave me alone, he thought.

Through video gridlines, the ticking LEDs superimposed over his field of vision, the figures on the TV were twice distanced from him. Flat, two-dimensional representations. Not real.

So it didn't matter.

He sighted along the rippling top of his handgun.

"Don't do it, Max!" Moses implored. *"Listen to us! You must hold onto your humanity. Soon it will be all you have. Listen to us . . . !"*

Max tightened his muscles, and the handgun fired.

The TV screen erupted blood and living tissue. The cabinet jerked leeward with the impact of a gazelle hit by an elephant gun, then slumped forward convulsing in a death agony.

Max was aware of the helmet's lingering influence. He could not escape it. It was with him still, controlling his view of the world no matter where he went or what he did, no matter how hard he tried to leave it behind and rely only on the evidence of his own senses. Sometimes he did not even know it was there. It was becoming—or had already become—an operational part of his brain.

Now, however, for the time being, its blood-lust sated, the helmet dissolved from his head and left him with a miserable, pounding headache.

Max retreated into himself. He slid his gun hand into its abdominal berth.

He sat staring into the gathering gloom, waiting without hope for the last vestige of manufactured sensation to dissolve through and leave him as he had been once, a long time ago.

* * *

The bleating of a foghorn brought him round.

At first he wasn't sure where he was. The creaking of rotted timbers, the gentle slapping . . .

Rocked in the cradle of the deep, he thought, *now I lay me down to sleep.*

He wanted to stay here, not to move.

But the waters were rising.

He heard the skittering of tiny claws, the scissoring of sharp, pointed teeth, saw the red beads of the rats' eyes closing in.

There could be no safe port till it was over.

It was time to move again.

He zigzagged out of the shipping yard under cover of night. The cloud layer had not lifted but now, with the sun down, the mist thickened with darkness like ink in milk. The lights of the dockyard and the city beyond mimicked tall, overgrown puffballs ripening with spores under an effluvial sky.

He retraced the old side streets for miles, it seemed, before he rounded the corner to the Cathode Ray Mission.

The building was dark as a sepulcher. A sign on the front door: CLOSED FOR ALTERATIONS.

He went to the side, followed a fence around back to a gate and the rear entrance. An arched door was barricaded with trash bags. He kicked the bags aside and tried the door. Locked.

He smashed glass with his elbow, reached through and let himself in.

The main hall of the Mission was unchanged—partitions, cubicles like confessionals—with no sign of alterations of any kind. The only light was the spill from the streetlamps outside the high windows.

It was enough for Max.

But wait. There was another light, a small, yellow cone next to one of the recycled television sets.

Max crept closer.

Yes. A high-intensity mini-worklight beaming down on a makeshift tabletop desk. A portable typewriter, sheafs of papers, a teetering stack of videocassettes, a half-eaten meal. A cup of coffee that was still warm.

Footsteps.

He dodged behind a partition and waited. The footsteps clicked downstairs, came this way—

"Bianca O'Blivion?"

He showed himself.

Her eyes widened with curiosity, but with only slight surprise.

"I run Civic TV. I was on a talk show with your father."

"So it was to be you, after all. You've come to kill me."

"No, no . . ."

"Then why *have* you come here?"

"I . . . don't know."

She didn't understand. They had met before. Hadn't they? He couldn't remember anything. His motives, his words, his actions seemed beyond his control.

He came forward out of the shadows. "I'm Max Renn," he explained. "I run Civic TV. I don't . . . I don't kill people."

Bianca looked at him as though she did not know him. She held to the videocassettes she had brought downstairs. Her fingers bent and white moons rose on her nails.

"Oh, but you do," she said. "You're an assassin now. For VIDEODROME. They can program you, play you like a videotape recorder. They can make you do what they want—and they want you to destroy whatever is left of Brian O'Blivion. They want you to destroy me."

Her last words triggered something inside him.

“Destroy you,” he repeated in a conditioned monotone.

“Of course. Why else do you suppose you’ve come here? Can you think of another reason, any other reason at all?”

Destroy you, destroy you, destroy you . . .

He took his handgun out of his jacket.

Bianca retreated. By the time he noticed that she had slipped out of his line of sight, she was deep into the maze of cubicles.

He straightened his gun in front of him and went after her.

Miles of cubicles. Clicking feet, then a flash of hair above one partition. He sidled up to it, kicked it down.

On the other side, a woman’s face.

“Nicki?” he said. “Is that you? What are you doing here?”

Inside the cubicle, a TV screen was on a tight shot of Nicki Brand being tortured against a soft wall. It was the same VIDEODROME episode he had watched too many times.

“She worked here,” said Bianca.

Dazed, he stared at Nicki’s silently screaming face. “You—and O’Blivion?”

Bianca said, “She came to Brian O’Blivion five years ago. She studied with him. And saw firsthand what VIDEODROME was doing to him. She also saw what it could be. In the right hands.”

At that instant a wire loop snared Nicki around the throat. Two powerful offscreen hands twisted and tightened, garroting her in extreme close-up.

The tape ran out, and the screen went blank.

“That was the part they didn’t show you,” said Bianca. “I stole it from them just for you to see. They killed her, Max. They killed Nicki Brand. She died on VIDEODROME. They used her image to seduce you after she was already dead.”

“But in the beginning, before—before she went . . .”

“She knew that you were VIDEODROME’s next target. We planned to intercept you, use you to dig deeper into VIDEODROME. She tried to play it both ways. But she got caught in the middle, and they killed her. She would have died in any event. She didn’t realize it, but she was hopelessly addicted. The tumor had begun to take root. She thought she was immune—but she wasn’t. VIDEODROME is death.”

Bianca came up to him, very close, blocking out everything else.

“I know what you’ve become. It may have started out as hallucination, but now it’s real. Don’t you get it, Mr. Renn? You’re the spring line and the new fall schedule. And Barry Convex is the

Program Director. But at least you're inside VIDEODROME now. And now that you are, do you know what you have to do? You become the cancer, you become the tumor that destroys the body. You destroy VIDEODROME!"

She took his gun hand in her two hands without revulsion.

"But we'll have to go all the way through it, Max. All the way through to the end. We can't stop where you are now, stuck in the middle. Not us. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

She helped him raise the gun.

"It's time for you to be deprogrammed, Max. And what better way than with an act of symbolic violence? You must be free, so that you can become the living word, the logos, the manifestation of philosophy made flesh on earth. Do it, Max. Do it before they kill you. Do it now . . ."

Max felt the Walther PPK arm itself. Now his clubbed hand was entirely overgrown with flesh and veins with no traces of metal. His gun arm cocked—

As from out of the television screen emerged a three-dimensional gun identical to his own, attached to a video arm, leveled directly at his chest. It grew out and out, extending two, three or more feet into the cubicle.

And fired at point-blank range.

Once, twice, three times.

There was a roar like thunder in the Mission.

Max sagged to his knees, his own gun arm smoking.

There were three bullet holes in the TV screen.

Bianca bent over him in the near-darkness. "That's better, so much better. It's always painful to remove the cassette, to change the program . . ."

She scooted her hands under his jacket and shirt.

He looked down. His skin was smooth, soft. No holes, no wounds, no empty places that needed to be filled up. Perfect, unmarked as a newborn baby's skin.

"Now that you have, you'll see that you've become something quite different from what you were. You've become the video word made flesh. Say it with me."

She lent him her strength.

"Please say it," she said.

He sighed, giving up the ghost. Something left him then. It was a weight that had no substance, like the gravity that had held him down since he first came into this world.

“I’m . . . the video word made flesh,” he said.

Bianca smiled for the first time.

“And now that you are, you know what you must do. You must turn against VIDEODROME. They’ve come close this time, Max. They almost got you to make it easy for them. There’s only one more obstacle to stand up in their way—*you.* You use the weapons they have given you to destroy them. Death to VIDEODROME! *Long live the new flesh!”*

“Death to VIDEODROME,” repeated Max. “Long live the new flesh.”

Chapter Fifteen

"IT WAS ONLY TWENTY-SIX HOURS AGO, IN THE BUILDING YOU SEE BEHIND ME, THAT A BIZARRE, APPARENTLY MOTIVELESS SHOOTING OCCURRED WHICH HAS TRIGGERED OFF AN INTENSIVE MANHUNT BY METRO POLICE . . ."

Max withdrew out of the sunlight into the doorway of a cigar store in order to get a better view. No one noticed him. He was almost dirty enough now to blend in with the scenery.

"THIRTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD MAX RENN, PRESIDENT OF THE CIVIC TV CORPORATION, IS BEING SOUGHT IN CONNECTION WITH THE SHOOTING DEATHS OF TWO EXECUTIVES OF CHANNEL 83, A SUBSIDIARY OF CIVIC TV . . ."

The passers-by didn't seem to notice Max. Not even the transient who had set up his homestead in front of the cigar store. He was not even watching his own TV, though the portable was joined to his mittened hand by a short umbilical of frayed rope. He was more interested in the possibility of wheedling a coin or an extra cigarette for the upturned beggar's hat in his lap.

"RENN WAS LAST SEEN LEAVING THE BUILDING SHORTLY AFTER THE BODIES OF THE TWO EXECUTIVES WERE FOUND IN A BLOOD-SPATTERED BOARD ROOM . . ."

There followed a still photograph of Max, a three-year-old publicity shot from the news archives, sharing a split-screen with a close-up of a Walther PPK.

Max had not taken into account TV reports and newspapers. He felt as conspicuous as a clay duck at a skeet shoot. He inched away from the battered portable. He couldn't go far or he would lose his stake-out view of the other side of the street. He hunkered deeper into the doorway, trying to watch the newscast with one eye.

"Hey, Teddy . . ."

The derelict started to flap the hat in front of the TV screen: manual image scrambling. He was getting hot under the collar. He had been aware of Max standing there, partaking of the entertainment for free.

"You wanna see the monkey dance, you gotta pay the piper, know what I'm sayin'?"

Max spoke up to distract him before the guy had a chance to notice whose face was on the telecast. "Haven't I seen you at the Cathode

Ray Mission?"

The man switched off his TV, offended. Like other broadcasters supplying a public service, he did not bother to monitor his own shows. He had more important things on his mind, like survival.

"Hey, Teddy, c'mon! I stole the concept, but I didn't steal the thing. Ya see what I'm sayin'? The *concept,* ya see, but not the thing itself . . ."

He's right, thought Max. Ya got to pay the piper.

He dug in his pocket for change. He turned the pocket inside out. It was empty. Who will cut the barber's hair? he wondered.

"Hey, you know how much my monkey's batteries cost? An' they don't last in the cold. The cold knocks 'em right out. I can't dance. You know I would if I could . . . Ya see what I'm sayin' to ya, Teddy?"

Just then Max caught sight of a red plaid shirt and jacket liner loping along the opposite sidewalk. As Max watched, Harlan disappeared into a tacky storefront under the SUPERIOR OPTICAL sign.

Harlan was on time for his new job.

Max flushed with righteous anger.

"Can't dance," the derelict called after him, justifying himself to whoever would listen. "You know I would if I could . . . Ya see what I'm sayin' to ya, Teddy?"

I can't dance, either, thought Max, and crossed the street, dodging traffic.

Inside, this particular branch of Superior Optical looked like an undersized version of an all-night drugstore: shopping bag ladies with rolled stockings taking a load off while they pretended to wait for prescriptions, a tubercular wino with broken glasses hanging off his face, a jackbooted cop degloving long enough to have his motorcycle shades adjusted. WE ACCEPT PERSONAL CHECKS, said a placard. Harlan was nowhere in sight.

Max showed the cop his back and played customer with a motley heap of bargain vinyl eyeglass cases.

A lithe Jamaican clerk wandered over to Max.

"Hello! Mornin', sport. They call me Brolley. May-can I help you, sir?"

"Just looking," muttered Max.

"Sho', man. But that's a good one. There ain't much to see here, but take your time and have a good look, anyway."

Brolley was distracted by a lumpen woman in a red headband. He took a slip of paper from her.

"Now what is? Sho', this is one helluva 'script you got here. Very tricky grind. Can't imagine you'd see things too clear without them, you know. But don't worry at all. My man get you fixed up in no time . . ."

Max took advantage of the diversion to slip around the end of the counter. The clerk was writing up the woman's order and the cop was spit-polishing his one-way aviators. Max escaped into the stockroom and sealed the door shut behind him.

Harlan was alone with his work, busy stuffing cartons with excelsior and taping them for shipment.

The door clicked and he glanced up.

An inkling of panic crossed his face, then was replaced by a controlled smile.

Max smiled back. "Where's Convex?"

"Ah, he's setting up his trade show. Gotta introduce the spring line . . ."

Max strolled up to him, a member of the club now. "What's in the box?"

"Your head." Harlan gave out with his phony hipster's chuckle. The carton he was working on was specially reinforced, larger and more durable than the others. About the size of a space helmet. "I've got your head in this box."

Max laughed.

"You've been busy, Max. Been readin' about you in the papers. Have you been to see Bianca O'B?"

"I saw her," said Max casually. Reporting in, comrade, he thought.

"And did she give you any trouble?"

"No."

"Well." Harlan was relieved. "That's good. I'm glad you finally got with the program, *patrón*. Maybe you'd like to visit somebody else now. Is that why you're here?"

"Maybe," said Max. "Who have you got in mind?"

"You've been very useful to us, Max. We'd like to keep using you until you're all gone."

He set his tools aside and pushed his wire rims up on his nose. He reached under his jacket liner and came out with a new cassette.

To Max, this one appeared so deformed it lay respirating on Harlan's palm as if it couldn't get its breath. Its reels puckered and shrank away from the light.

"What's that, my latest set of instructions?"

"Yeah. You might say so. Barry left it for you. I was going to deliver

it personally.”

Harlan approached with his handful of medicine.

Max grinned and raised his arms like a good boy so Harlan could get at his buttons.

But Harlan only slapped the tape against Max’s chest. “Take it home and play it first chance you get. I imagine it’s pretty important.”

“What do you mean?” said Max. “I don’t have to take it anywhere to play it. Remember?”

“What are you talking about?”

Max opened his jacket and shirt.

“God, Max! What have you done to yourself?”

“You haven’t seen this before?”

“I—I know you hallucinated some kind of cavity in your guts. That was part of the delusion we designed for you. We played along. That’s how we related to you, so you’d get the message. We, ah, played along with your visions. But this . . . !”

“You see it now, don’t you? It’s real, isn’t it? *Really* real?”

“You’ve been mutilating yourself. You’ve sliced yourself open. It’s —”

“No, no. It’s part of my body. Long live the new flesh.” Max laughed.

Harlan was scared.

“Max, you’d better get out of here like that before—before somebody walks in. We’ll get help for you. But for now, here. Take the tape. Do what it—”

“Aren’t you going to do it my way?”

“Max . . .”

“Come on, Harlan. For old times’ sake. Just this once. Play along one more time. It’ll keep me happy.”

“I—I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you supposed to humor me? Barry wouldn’t like it if I told him you weren’t being cooperative.”

“Well . . .”

“My world is the real world now. It’s much closer to the truth. Go on. Put it in. Just for a minute. I want you to. You’ll see. It won’t hurt a bit. I promise.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay, if that’s what you want, then I guess . . .”

He came up to Max, tapping the cassette nervously.

Max held Harlan’s eyes with his own as he let his body open to receive the latest directive. He spread his arms to lay himself open

even wider, presenting himself as utterly passive and receptive, a mere vehicle.

"Give it to me now, Harlan. Give me your tape. That's it . . ."

He sucked Harlan in.

Harlan felt around inside. "This is weirding me out, Max. Biology isn't my field. But everything seems to be okay . . . If I didn't know better I'd swear I was hallucinating, myself. I don't know what this means, but I guess there are some parts of the Big Picture I haven't been told about yet . . ."

Max ceased playing the vessel. He lowered his arms and concentrated on taking control of his own body at last, on becoming one with it.

Inches from Max's face, Harlan's eyes sprung wide.

"Open up again, Max, a little bit wider. I can't get my hand out—Max! I said—"

Max bore down with every fiber of his being and took in Harlan's message, digested it, rendered it harmless. He was able to stomach a lot now. It went down smooth.

"Max, my hand! My—"

He relented and allowed Harlan, whom he had permitted such easy entry, to pull out. But he made sure to keep a little souvenir for himself, a token of affection to be left behind in this moment of incomparably intimate access.

Harlan raised his hand. Or rather he raised his arm. There was now no longer a hand on this particular wrist. The end of the arm came out a bloody stump. In place of the hand was a shank of bone with a round potato-masher charge of TNT on the end.

A hand grenade.

Harlan bleated in mortal agony as the new appendage, dripping blood and incipient tissue, began ticking.

A great energy wind emanated from Max and caught Harlan full force, driving him across the room. Harlan's glasses blew off and smashed to the floor. His jacket liner vest inflated like a sail as he landed against the wall.

"See you in Pittsburgh," said Max, a second before the hand grenade exploded.

Brolley rushed in.

"What you doin' back here, man? My God, you blowin' de place right up! What that I hear, a bomb? Man, you stay right where you are. I got policeman. You—"

Smoke and plaster dust settled around Max. He walked calmly to

the other side of the room, stepped over Harlan's scattered remains and out through the opening in the wall.

In the alley outside, people were coughing and running through the smoke that was pouring out of the hole, their eyes offering irrefutable verification of what had happened. Max smiled. A mother pushing a shopping cart yanked her little girl to her side and clattered away to the street. Bums shouted and cursed at the disturbance as Max sauntered past.

But nobody tried to stop him.

"WELL, YOU KNOW ME . . ."

Bright lights as blue-white as daylight shone down from an unseen source.

". . . AND I SURE KNOW YOU. EVERYONE OF YOU!"

Somewhere behind the lights faces shifted, rustling for position.

Then the audience broke into applause.

Onstage, Convex waved at a man at a front table.

"HI, PETE! GOOD TO SEE YOU. NOW THEN . . ." He cleared his throat and formally began his speech, reciting it as faithfully as a litany. "WE'RE HERE TO CELEBRATE THE ARRIVAL OF OUR NEW SPRING COLLECTION. AREN'T THESE KIDS WONDERFUL?"

He turned like an m.c. and called attention to the troupe of dancers who were waiting patiently behind him, catching their breaths from the number that had just ended.

Again the audience broke into applause.

The stage was decorated with huge sequined prop eyeglasses done up in Vegas-style glitter, with flashy all-purpose neon backdrops dressed to suggest some vague sixteenth or seventeenth-century reference. The dancers in their powdered wigs and eyeglass masks panted and perspired, the women's unnaturally full bosoms heaving under their push-up bodices. One of the costumes had torn in the previous dance number, and a spangled disco leotard showed through under the chintzy hoop skirt.

"THE MEDICI LINE!" announced Convex. "AND OUR THEME THIS YEAR IS BASED ON A QUOTATION FROM THAT FAMOUS RENAISSANCE STATESMAN AND PATRON OF THE ARTS, LORENZO DE MEDICI—'LOVE COMES IN AT THE EYE.' NOW I THINK EVEN PETE OUGHTA BE ABLE TO SELL THE HELL OUT OF A CLASSY CAMPAIGN LIKE THAT . . . !"

The spate of applause swept Convex to new heights of glory. He lifted and opened his arms in supplication, waggling his microphone

over the heads of the conventioneers.

"BLESS YOU," he said without embarrassment.

Throughout the ballroom hands clapped together vigorously.

A man was moving down front to get a better view. Convex shaded his eyes and cracked a smile, leaning over to see who it was.

Then he shielded the microphone and said in a stage whisper, "What are you doing here, Max?"

"Hi, Barry," said Max cheerily.

"Max, I don't think this is the place to—"

Max's grin vanished. "I disagree, Barry. I think it's a good time. Perfect, in fact. The best of all possible worlds."

He took his hand out of his jacket pocket.

"Jesus, Max, what happened to your hand? You better get some first aid. Wait backstage while I—"

Max raised his gun hand, now thoroughly deformed, leprous beyond recognition, so that the audience could get a good look at what was really there.

"Really, Barry, it's nothing. Surprised? You shouldn't be upset about it—it's only a small example of your latest handiwork."

He took careful aim at Convex's head, sighting squarely between the eyes.

Convex tripped over the speaker cord as he scrambled to the other end of the stage.

Max moved with him, holding him in his sights.

"Are you crazy?" said Convex, backing up to a gigantic pair of cut-out spectacles. "You can't just come in here and—"

"I used to be, Barry. For awhile. But not anymore."

"What do you want? I'm sure we can work something out. I have plenty of—"

"I want you to take a bite off this, Barry," said Max.

He squeezed his hand closed, and fired.

Not bullets now but airborne gobbets of flesh sprang out and smacked Convex in the side of the head. They clung to his skin and burrowed into his skull, spreading hungrily.

Convex fell apart. He dropped to the stage, writhing, as his face and the bones behind his face disintegrated in full public view, masses of pearlescent tumors sprouting and devouring him from the inside out.

Pandemonium broke loose. The audience went wild. Salesmen and their wives with matching helmets of sprayed hair scattered in every direction.

Max stayed where he was a few seconds longer, long enough to give Convex a big hand, a final round of applause that was his alone.

Though it was mid-afternoon, the edge of the city already seemed to be preparing for dusk. Here it was perpetually turning late in the day; the air was full of suspended moisture, and the slant of the light where the land mass met the waters of the great lake was oblique, without glare and inexplicably melancholy.

Max tested the chain link fence, found the stretched place and stole into the dockyard.

Once inside, he crouched and ran for the ELIZABETH DANE II.

As he squirreled his way below deck, he brushed against an old chain that was swinging from the engine compartment. It marked him with a rusty red smear, ringing like an ancient bell calling him to school or to prayer.

Down in the hold, the waters were rising faster then ever.

He slewed the garbage as far aft as possible, discovered an old mattress and staked out a relatively dry spot for himself. He even found a cup and a plate and what was left of a hollowed candle. Almost enough to set up housekeeping.

Somewhere over his head, the once so promising world seemed to break loose on the tide and float away into the distance until it no longer mattered. The profit-taking and the losses, the living and the dying and being born into it, staying or going away, fighting or running—what was the point? Or was there one?

He sank down on the mattress with his head in his hands and wondered whether anything he had ever done had been worth it.

He felt a pair of eyes very close by, behind and above him.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the broad, pink face of a woman. She was somehow familiar. He had never known her like.

“I was hoping you’d be back.” he said.

“I’m always here when you need me,” said Nicki.

The TV set sat there. He couldn’t stop it. The TV set sat there and he couldn’t stop it. Nothing had ever stopped it and nothing ever would stop it. He should have known.

“I’m here to guide you, Max. I’ve learned a lot since I last saw you. I’ve learned that death is not the end. I can help you.”

He said, in a voice so lacking in energy that it was not much more than a whisper, “I don’t know where I am now. I’m having trouble . . . finding my way around.”

Nicki nodded compassionately and moved in close to the screen.

Her voice was soft, soothing, more comforting than he remembered it ever being in life. *"That's because you've gone just about as far as you can with the way things are.* VIDEODROME *still exists. It's very big, very complex. You've hurt them but you haven't destroyed them. To do that, you have to go on to the next phase."*

The boat tipped further and chains clanked in the shadows. Water sloshed through the timbers at his feet. He heard a high-voltage arcing from the back of the set. The old TeleRanger had been good for a lot of years; but its time was almost used up.

He spoke to her with growing urgency so as to get it all said, everything, before it was too late.

"What phase is that?"

"Your body has already done a lot of changing. But that's only the beginning. The beginning of the new flesh. You have to go all the way now. A total transformation. Do you think you're ready?"

What else was there? "I guess I am. How—how do we do it?"

"To become the new flesh, you first have to kill the old flesh. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to let your body die. Just come to me, Max. Come to Nicki . . .

"Watch. I'll show you how. It's easy."

Nicki's nineteen-inch face was replaced by a reverse-angle of the hold in which he sat.

Unexplainably, a small bonfire was burning on the wet planks. The planks were raised, ribbed, constructed to create the semblance of a gridwork beneath his feet. The water had not yet splashed up to douse the flames. Through the rising smoke, he saw a man kneeling before the fire. The camera zoomed in through the flames.

The man was Max Renn.

Onscreen, he was holding a highly-evolved, organic handgun to his head.

"Long live the new flesh," said the voice of the man on TV.

His eyes were looking at Max.

Then the gun discharged.

The TV screen blew up, throwing bits of bloody flesh out into the hold.

Max sat there on the mattress, seeing all this. The exploded TeleRanger sizzled and popped, gushing smoke. Rats chittered away; they seemed more frightened than Max was. The knowledge pleased him.

He left the mattress and knelt before the demolished console cabinet, straining for release. In the firelight the floor became red

beneath his knees as the flames reflected in the water.

He drew his gun hand out of his pocket for comparison. It was curved and shaped, balanced perfectly, as if it had always been there. He raised his arm and rested his hand against his temple, lining up the position, and was filled with a great peace.

The fire crackled and flared higher over the electrically charged water. The smoky air became warm, moist, and began to distort into grainy bands of light and darkness.

A great weight seemed to hold him to his knees, firm but not unkind. Its pressure was almost loving, its gentle insistence almost cruel.

He had no choice.

But that was all right. There were so many little dyings that it didn't matter which of them was death. After all, how else could it end?

It would be a new experience. The ultimate one. Wouldn't it?

He thought: And the last of the old shall become the first of the new.

This is it.

Do it. The trick was not to stop until it was done. *Do it.*

Do it now.

He looked at his surroundings, as though awakening from a dream. Like himself, it was a place he had never known.

Until now.

His hand closed as he prepared for the first thrust.

He could no longer see Nicki's face. He needed a witness. He closed his eyes. He wanted her to be looking at him.

"Long live the new flesh," he said.

There was a roar of thunder.